

I've always thought it looked so cute when I said something to my dog and she cocked her head to the side. Is there any reason why dogs do this other than to look cute?

Dogs have a lot more control over the movement of their ears than we do. They have at least 12 muscles that control the movement of their ears in every direction. We can tell a lot about whether a dog is relaxed or anxious by watching the position of their ears along with the rest of their body language. If the ears are pulled tight back on the head, that may be a sign of fear or anxiety and potential aggression. In addition, moving their ears around voluntarily toward a sound they are trying to hear may help them pinpoint its location and hear it more clearly. When they tilt their head to one side, the ear of the upper side of the head is now positioned better so the sound waves can enter the ear canal more easily and reach the ear drum. When her head is in this position, if you tell her how cute she is or give her any other attention, that will serve as positive reinforcement and it will encourage her to do it more often. So it is possible sometimes she is doing it just to look cute and please you.

Dogs can often tell by our inflection when we are saying something that is important to them, so they may do the head tilt to pick up every sound. If we are having a conversation with someone else, they often realize it doesn't concern them and wouldn't tend to cock their head. If we suddenly speak in a higher pitched voice, it will generally get their attention, probably because those types of sounds are instinctively what they listened for when hunting small animals.

If your dog ever has her head in a tilted position and it remains that way, that is a sign of a problem. There could be an inner ear or balance problem in the brain that causes her head to be tilted. Usually this is due to an ear infection, but can often occur without an identifiable cause in an older dog. Those cases are referred to as vestibular syndrome and are often accompanied by other signs such as circling to one side, falling, stumbling and unusually movements of the eyes. These are all signals you should take her to your veterinarian.

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