

Attention and Affection: The Right Kind at the Right Time

Beth Bradley

Most of us have heard of the studies that show how the simple act of petting a dog can provide significant health benefits, such as lowering blood pressure. It's amazing that such a simple act could work such wonders! But is it a simple act? Not really. Like all social interactions, giving attention to your dog can communicate different messages, depending on the context. Giving your dog the wrong kind of attention, or giving attention at the wrong time can result in unwanted behaviors that are more likely to raise your blood pressure than lower it!

Don't communicate the wrong message.

You are your dog's leader. Attention should be given on your terms, not when your dog demands it. Giving in to your dog's demands for attention communicates that he is in charge, not you. Not surprisingly, he will begin to feel entitled in other situations. That tasty tidbit on the counter or in the garbage can? He'll find a way to get it no matter what has to be torn up or knocked down. You're on the phone and ignoring him? He'll bark incessantly to help you straighten out your priorities. Although the unwanted behaviors may vary from dog to dog, you can be sure of one thing: Allowing your dog to demand attention communicates that being pushy and persistent will get him what he wants. Don't relinquish your leadership role. Attention and play should always be initiated by you.

Petting and attention should also not be given when your dog is nervous, fearful, aggressive, or over-excited. Giving positive attention in these situations rewards the behavior. Too often, I see people attempting to calm their dogs by repeating "It's OK; good dog" when the dog is balking, cowering, growling, or jumping. There is nothing good about any of those behaviors, but as long as the behavior gets attention, the behavior will continue. . You cannot reason with a dog. Do not let your actions or words communicate to your dog that these behaviors are appropriate to the situation.

Be especially careful to give the right attention at the right time with puppies. Puppies learn their manners by how others respond to their behavior. If you laugh, pet, or give other positive attention when a puppy jumps or mouths, you communicate that this is acceptable, possibly even desirable, behavior. He will continue the behavior, and you will end up with an adult dog that jumps, nips, and bites.

What kind of attention communicates the appropriate messages?

There are many ways you can give your dog positive attention and communicate the appropriate messages.

Grooming Teach your dog the *stand* command and use it to give him a brushing each day. Grooming gives your dog the attention he craves while maintaining your leadership role. A daily grooming session also gives you the opportunity to check your dog for any ticks, burrs, sore spots, or other issues with his coat or skin.

Walking Even if you have a fenced in yard, your dog still needs a walk each day. Canines have an instinctive need to “travel” even if their needs to exercise and eliminate waste have already been met. Use a daily walk as an opportunity to give your dog your full attention. Avoid talking on your cell phone. Instead, keep your focus on your dog and train him to focus on you. Have him walk by your side and keep up a good pace. You and your dog will benefit from the exercise and the bonding time.

Training practice Practicing commands your dog knows is a perfect opportunity to give your dog the praise and attention he craves. He will learn to associate your positive attention with obedient behavior. Observe how your dog responds to different levels of attention. For some dogs, petting them during training is too distracting and a few words of praise are sufficient. For other dogs, a quick pat or touch keeps them motivated and on track. If you are practicing a high-energy action command, such as bringing back a ball, you may need a much higher intensity of praise and attention.

Reinforcing calm behavior When your dog is behaving calmly, reinforce his good, calm behavior with attention. For example, if he is lying nearby while you work on your computer or watch TV, periodically reach down to give him a gentle pet and a soft word. Over time, he will learn to recognize which behaviors draw your positive attention, and he will repeat those desirable behaviors.

Conclusion

You love your dog, and of course you want to communicate that love to him. However, the next time you reach out to pet or praise your dog, remember that attention and affection almost always communicate more than just love. Depending on the context and the situation, your attention may communicate messages that encourage unwanted behaviors, confuse your dog, or even increase his fear or anxiety. Conversely, giving the right kind of attention at the right time and on your terms will allow you to experience the joy (and, yes, the health benefits) of sharing your life with a calm, confident, and well-behaved dog,

About Beth Bradley

As one of the top professional trainers and competitors in the United States, Beth is committed to improving the lives of dogs and people through training. She teaches group classes and private lessons in basic and advanced obedience, competition dog training, puppy training, Schutzhund training, personal protection, Canine Good Citizenship, and therapy dog training.

Beth also trains and places service dogs for children with autism and custom trains “cross-trained” companion/protection dogs for families and individuals. She consults for shelters in the tri-state area and for New Jersey law enforcement on cases involving canine behavior and temperament.

Beth began studying animal behavior and dog training at age twelve. She has worked and studied under many renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. After graduating from Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, Beth worked as a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer. In 1989, she founded her own company and has made dog training and consulting her full-time career since 1995. Competing with her dogs, Beth has earned national and international titles, championships, and honors in both Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. In 2003 and 2009, she represented the United States in the FCI World Trials. In 2015, Beth and her dog Fyte qualified for the elite team representing the United States at the WUSV in Finland, making Fyte the youngest qualifying dog in the history of this worldwide competition. Beth also took the Vice-championship with Fyte at the 2015 US Schutzhund Clubs of American National Championships.

Beth is the author of *Real World Dog Training*, and has produced a number of training DVDs and videos. In addition, Beth trains and handles dogs for movies, television, and theater, with recent credits including appearances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, *Board Walk Empire*, the *Batman* franchise, *Damages*, *Blue Bloods*, *The Good Wife*, *The Blacklist*, *Billions*, and *Gotham*.

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