

A TOUCHING MATTER

Why does it feel so good when we pet our dogs? We can't help ourselves when we see them; a need comes over us to pat their head or rub their ears and in general to just touch them everywhere. You won't be surprised to learn that the science behind this has shown that doing so causes the body to release neurochemicals of pleasure which helps explain why we like doing it. It feels good!

It's no surprise then that we are drawn to touching, hugging and kissing our pets. That fact is not in question. The real question is whether our pets enjoy us touching them.

I would suspect the answer to this depends on which dog you ask. Just like us, some dogs love to be touched constantly while others prefer not to be touched much at all; the majority likely lies somewhere in the middle. Sometimes they do like to be touched and sometimes, they don't. That being true we must then ask another question: are dogs supposed to allow us to touch them when they don't want to be?

Many of us remember the following situation happening: You are a young child and your family visits a distant aunt who you really don't know. When you get there, she



comes running up squealing at how cute you are and then her hands reach out towards your face. Your nose picks up the scent of her perfume first as her hands grab and smooch the sides of your face. You squirm in horror trying to resist as she pulls your face towards her and then plants a huge kiss on you. Then her hands reach around, and she gives you a big hug shaking back and forth. As a kid I just remember how embarrassed I was, and mortified.

So how is this scene any different from one that happens so many times to our dogs?

You are out for a walk and someone sees your dog. They come running over saying how beautiful your dog is and asking if they can pet it. They come up close to your dog, lean over its head and begin to touch and ruffle the dog's fur. If you watch your dog when this happens there's a good chance you would see them desperately signalling that they are not happy with this new occurrence. They have no idea who this stranger is or what their intention is. All they know is a stranger is coming straight at them baring their teeth (a smile) and their hands are coming at their face. Generally being on leash they have no choice but to endure. Kudos to our dogs for putting up with our rudeness.

When I first learned to read some of the ways a dog communicates with us it was an eye-opening experience. To be honest, I sometimes wish I did not learn it because doing so resulted in me feeling hurt at times. That was because like most people I was under the impression that dogs loved to be petted and hugged so when I got a sign that said, *"I am not really enjoying what you are doing and would prefer you stop"* I felt hurt. Why didn't my dog want me to touch them? Did I do something wrong? Don't all dogs want to be touched? It was at this point that I learned the lesson. **DOGS DON'T ALWAYS WANT TO BE TOUCHED.** It's okay for them to say it and even better when we hear it, respect it, and act, or in this case don't act on it.

My 12-year-old black Lab, Archie, is one of those dogs that really could not care less if you pet him. For the most part he prefers that you don't but is very gentle and will tacitly allow you to do so if you insist. As you pet or touch him you will see him looking as far away from you as possible. The second you stop you will see him move away and not closer. He likes a good bum rub here and there but only when he initiates it. My yellow Lab, Dani, loves to be touched **SOMETIMES**. She lets me know when those times are, however, many times she does not. On

a walk she would prefer both I and any strangers did not touch her. When she is lying in her bed, she also is not crazy about being touched. How can I tell? How does she let me know this?

With Dani she will lick her lips. When a dog is lip licking and they have not just eaten, then they are likely doing so because they are uncomfortable with something. That's one of Dani's signals that she is uncomfortable with

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something. She will also look away and duck to avoid the touch. When Dani is lying on her bed, I will come over to pat her head but as soon as my hand touches her head, she starts to lick her lips and look away from me. If I stop petting, she stops licking but immediately will start again if I start touching her. She is clearly telling me that she is resting and does not want to be touched. I can't say how many times I second guess myself but again the only time she starts licking is when I touch her.

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When I am sitting on the couch and Dani comes over and engages with me, I know she wants to be touched. I will rub her neck. As I move my hands down the top of her back, I notice she stiffens slightly and starts to lick. I move back up her neck and she relaxes and stops licking. I can move my hands over her body touching different places and she will clearly tell me which place she enjoys the touch, and which places she does not. When this happens it's like a great conversation between us as we learn about each other.

It is important that we are cognizant of the possibility that our dogs don't always want to be touched. This is especially true when our dogs are on leash. A dog on

leash is a dog that cannot get away. Your dog knows it and it can change how they behave. Many people will tell me that off leash their dogs are great with other dogs but on walks they go crazy, barking and lunging. When a dog

is restrained on leash, they rely on us to have their backs and advocate for them. This means when someone comes up and wants to pet your dog you must take a second to read your dog and see if they too want to be touched. Don't be fooled with a dog that wants to approach and smell the stranger. The fact they want to smell still does

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not mean they want to be touched. Watch your dog as someone goes to touch them. More than likely they will duck or move their head to avoid it, their tail will likely lower and their ears will move back and lower.

When I meet people with my dog, I usually keep a bit of distance at first to read my dogs. When they ask, “May I pet your dog?” I tend to say, “I don’t know, let’s ask,” which you can imagine gets me strange looks. I tell the person to stand with their back to my dog. Then turn their head back and clap and call my dog. If my dog goes to them then I am sure they want to interact. But if they don’t, then that’s their answer: no.

I have a rule that says, “If a dog does not touch me, then I don’t touch the dog.” I allow the dog to make the first move. That does not mean I don’t love the dog or want to touch them but instead respect their feelings. I have to say that I found more dogs did not initiate touch than did. Many came for a smell, but that was not their invitation for me to touch — only smell.

Grisha Stewart, a noted dog trainer and developer of the BAT dog reactivity training system has a rule when it comes to touching. She calls it the 5 second rule. She will pet a dog for 5 seconds and then stop and see what the dog does. Does the dog lean in for more or turn its head away? Does the dog take its paw and pull your hand close or just sit there? If the dog leans in, she will again pat for another 5 -10 seconds and stop and check in with the dog again. You may be surprised at what your dog says.

Yesterday I ran into a touching incident that always makes me uneasy. We were walking the two dogs near a park when a young child ran up. I

am not sure where her mother was but wherever she was it was nowhere near her child. The child ran up saying she loved dogs and wanted to pet them as she moved closer I moved Dani away a bit and let Archie go over first since I trust him the most. As Dani moved in to smell, the little girl reached both hands at Dani’s face. I could see Dani’s head drop trying to avoid her touch and move away. As this was happening, I was uncomfortable wondering where the girl’s mother was and I was uncomfortable not knowing fully that Dani was okay with where the girl’s hands were going. This situation ended fine but reminded me how we need to teach children the touch rule when it comes to dogs. I should have kept Dani away as she got herself into a situation that she was uncomfortable with, and should have made that call or at least controlled the situation better. Children can be very unpredictable, so I tend to be alert when they are around dogs.

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It is important that we learn to respect our dogs’ feelings and touch is just one of the ways that we can do so. Dogs speak to us constantly, but they do so with gestures rather than words. That is how they speak to each other and so that is how they speak to us. They do it with their mouths, their ears, their tails and eyes, virtually every part of their body can tell a story. They are talking all the time.

What I am really trying to say with this article and many that I write is that it is important to respect our pets. We need to pay more attention to what they are trying to tell us. We have to allow our dogs to have a say about things like who touches them, and where and when they can be touched.

If they don’t want to be touched, then they don’t have to be. My dogs and I are a team. We work together and have each other’s backs. My dogs need to always

know they are safe around me and I will protect them and advocate for them. If they are not comfortable being touched by another person, I will kindly ask them not to pet my dog. I may end up offending some doing this, but my loyalties go to my dog; my teammate. I try to show people how they themselves probably would not want a stranger to touch them and that my dog is no different.

I have met many a dog in my time and can say that a larger amount did not want me to touch them, than did. Even those that came rushing up to smell me did not want me to pet them, they just wanted to smell me.

Touch can be such a wonderful thing. In the right cases it can cause us to feel calm and happy. Other times touch

can be uncomfortable and stressful. Those times we would prefer that we were not being touched and our dogs feel the same. Let’s be aware of this and respect it. It is just another way to show your dog

you love them and understand that sometimes it’s not touching that matters.

~ Stuart Hoffman,
Lab Rescue Volunteer and Trainer

The renowned Dog Trainer, Jean Donaldson, wrote one of the best books on how dogs tend to see things and how we can communicate with them called “CULTURE CLASH.” It is a book I strongly suggest anyone interested in improving their relationship with their dogs read. I don’t receive any remuneration for saying so.

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~ Sheri Manuel:

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Family to sweet Buddy & Aurora (also adopted from LRAS)