



Showing Affection

— to Your Dog —



Humans use touch to communicate greetings, connection and affection with handshakes, hugs or kisses. Dogs use gestures to communicate affection, too—they nuzzle, nudge, rub up against and even groom each other. Using human gestures on our canine companions, however, can be unsettling to them. The following are some better choices on how we can show affection to our much-loved pets.

Respect your dog's space. Dogs don't hug like we do; instead, they snuggle or nuzzle. To a dog, hugging is typically interpreted as an assertive gesture. If you want to give your dog a hug, remember that he may regard the gesture as overbearing. Respect his space, and go slowly over time to help him get used to your closeness.

Gentle strokes are best. To a dog, stroking is similar to nuzzling. When your dog puts his paw on another dog's neck, back or head, he is not "petting" the dog—he is expressing his assertiveness over him. For a human to pet a dog, however, is a perfectly acceptable form of affection, particularly when delivered as a loving stroke and accompanied by soft praise. The least threatening type of pet we can give a dog is stroking him under his chin.

Remember that some dogs are hypersensitive to touch due to chronic illness or environmental annoyances. If your dog has an unknown past, even the softest touch may startle him, so keep your movements slow, calm and deliberate. Gently stroke his shoulders and keep contact with his body while you give affection.

Resist picking up your small dog. Pups are picked up (by their mothers) only when they are very young. While most of us cannot physically pick up a Great Dane, we don't hesitate to swoop down and lift tiny dogs like Chihuahuas or Maltese. We forget that no matter how small, a dog is still a dog and is usually uncomfortable being picked up. This is simply not natural to a dog and puts him in a position where he may feel trapped.

Although unlikely, lifting up your dog can cause injury. A fall from your arms could break bones, harm the spine or worse. Dogs such as dachshunds, basset hounds and corgis are prone to back problems due to their long backs and short legs. Allowing them to jump up for attention or picking them up can actually cause strain on their vertebrae, leading to chronic pain or slipped discs.

Dogs learn by association. If a dog has ever been hit, pinned down, rolled over, kicked or over-handled in the past, we must rebuild his trust slowly and gently. This may mean little or no physical touch until he shows through his body language that he is ready for such attention.

Avoid pulling on your dog's collar. Grabbing your dog's collar to deal with issues like jumping up or rushing out the door can be viewed as very threatening; dogs just don't do this to each other. And you may have noticed that the more you pull back on your dog's leash or collar, the more he pulls forward. This tendency to pull is a natural, built-in reaction—think of sled dogs and how they pull a sled.

Every time we pull excessively on our dog's leash or collar, we risk causing damage to his neck and back. Constant tension or grabbing and yanking a dog by the collar can cause real harm by damaging the cervical vertebrae (neck bones), nerves in the neck, and trachea (windpipe).

Building a solid foundation of respect and trust with your dog leads the way to your being able to do virtually anything with him! Once you have established a trusting bond so that your dog understands you will protect him from harm, he will come to at least tolerate essential physical activities, and at best, enjoy them.

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