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Visual Communication – Different Breeds Seek Eye Contact Differently

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Staring into your dog's eyes is a joyous experience. As a matter of fact, it releases [oxytocin](#), known as the love hormone, in you and your dog. That's the same hormone, and therefore the same feeling, we get when we look at our children. But do all dogs look into our eyes in the same way? Because dogs use eye contact and follow the human gaze better than wolves, it's possible that a [breed's](#) ability to communicate visually is associated with how [genetically similar](#) that breed is to a wolf. Recent [research](#) suggests that the more closely related to wolves a breed is, the less often it will make spontaneous eye contact with humans.

Akitsugu Konno and his colleagues studied 120 pet dogs in two experimental tasks to determine if certain breeds of dog gazed at humans more or less than other breeds. They theorized that if relatedness to wolves determines the use of eye contact, then those breeds classified as ancient (most closely related to wolves) would show less eye contact than all other breeds. Alternatively, if our history of breeding for working dogs has led to greater eye contact, then certain working breeds would show an increased use of eye contact compared to all other breeds.

Twenty-six different breeds of dog were used in the study, and they were classified into five groups based on genetic relatedness. These groups were ancient (e.g. [Siberian Husky](#)), herding (e.g. [Border Collie](#)), hound (e.g. [Beagle](#)), retriever-mastiff (e.g. [Labrador Retriever](#)), and working (e.g. [German Shepherd Dog](#)).



The first task the dogs were required to complete was called the visual contact task. During this experiment, the dogs were free to make eye contact with the experimenter who was looking at the dog while standing beside an unreachable food container. The dog's gazing behavior was observed.

In the second task, called the unsolvable task, the dogs were given a hidden treat. The treat was placed under a container on a wooden board. For six trials, the dog could overturn the container and get the treat, but on the seventh trial, the unsolvable trial, the container was attached to the board, and the dog could not get at the treat. The dog was free to make eye contact with both the owner and the experimenter who stood behind the dog after he was presented with the immovable container. Again, the dog's gazing behavior was measured.

Almost all of the dogs spontaneously looked at humans during the tasks, indicating their attempt to communicate visually when trying to obtain a food reward. In fact, there were no differences in gazing behavior between breed groups during the visual contact task. However, during the unsolvable task, ancient breeds took longer to make eye contact with people, and they looked at people for shorter periods of time than any other breed group. This was in spite of the fact that they were equally motivated to solve the problem and get the treat.

This indicates that ancient breeds are less likely to use eye contact with humans to communicate. This is similar to previous studies conducted with wolves and in keeping with research on wild dogs. The researchers concluded that genetic similarity to wolves is responsible for differences in eye contact behavior, rather than human selection for certain working breeds, although they couldn't rule out the influence of breeding for specific behavioral traits.

Whether your dog is a natural gazer, or one of Konno's ancient breeds, you can always encourage eye contact by training a cue like "[Watch me](#)." And if you're looking to get your oxytocin fix for the day, besides gazing into your dog's eyes, the same hit of the love hormone can be had from petting, cuddling, or any other positive interaction with your dog.

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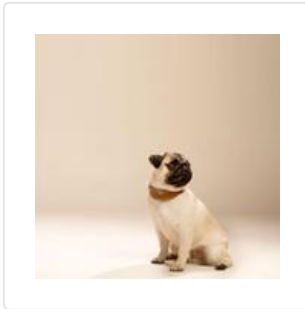
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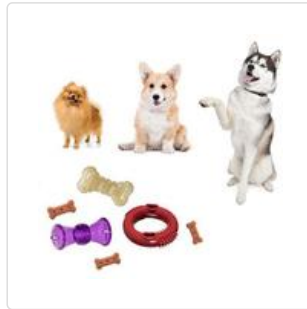
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