

What Your Dog Really Thinks of 'Baby Talk'

Do you enjoy talking to your dog in a slow, high-pitched, singsong voice? Do you think he enjoys it? While the response from a puppy may be totally different, this study reveals what your dog might say to you if he could talk.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A 2017 study shows that puppies respond positively to “baby talk” by humans, which is the slower, high-pitched manner of speech many people adopt with babies
- The study also demonstrates that unlike pups, adult dogs are unimpressed by baby talk
- It’s possible that baby talk helps puppies learn words
- Dogs past the puppy stage may not appreciate baby talk, but they do respond more to praise delivered in an upbeat rather than a neutral vocal tone

Many people (perhaps especially women) talk “baby talk” to their dogs. They use the same slow, high-pitched, singsong vocal style with dogs as they do with human babies.

The question is, how do dogs respond to baby talk? Do they enjoy it, or not so much? Interestingly, a 2017 study by a team of researchers from the U.S., the U.K., and France shows that while puppies seem to love it, adult dogs are less impressed.¹

For the experiment, 30 female volunteers were asked to look at pictures of dogs as they read scripted phrases of dog-directed speech into a recorder. The phrases were along the lines of “Hi! Hello cutie! Who’s a good boy? Come here! Good boy! Yes! Come here sweetie pie! What a good boy!”² The volunteers also read the scripts to a person.

While reading the scripts, the women naturally adopted the same tone of voice people use when speaking to human babies, and this was the case whether they were looking at images of puppies or adult dogs (though they raised their voices slightly higher when looking at puppies). However, when the women read the scripts to the person, the baby talk was absent.

Puppies React Very Positively to Baby Talk

Recordings in hand, the researchers visited an animal shelter and played them in the presence of 20 dogs — 10 puppies and 10 adults and seniors — while they observed and videotaped the dogs’ reactions.

The researchers noted that 9 of the 10 puppies in the experiment reacted strongly to the recorded voices, displaying play behaviors such as barking and running toward the speakers. Some of the pups even bowed in front of the speakers, inviting them to play!

The adult dogs, on the other hand, glanced quickly in the direction of the speakers and then proceeded to completely ignore the voices. When they heard the recordings of the women speaking to the person, neither the puppies nor the adult dogs showed much interest.

The researchers can't explain why humans speak in baby talk to dogs, or why the puppies responded to it while the older dogs did not. They theorized that humans probably respond to puppies and babies similarly, and as we know, infants tend to respond to baby talk.

The adult dogs, being worldly wise, knew right away there was no human in the room talking to them, and simply ignored the recorded voices.

Baby Talk May Help Puppies Succeed in Life

The research team concluded that people seem to view dogs as non-verbal companions and so we talk to them as we would a non-verbal human (otherwise known as a baby). We tend to use the same strategy in other situations in which we feel our audience may not fully understand us, for example, when we communicate with people who don't speak the same language we do.

Study co-author Nicolas Mathevon of the University of Lyon in Saint Étienne, France, thinks baby talk may help puppies learn words, just as it helps human babies learn language.

According to animal behaviorist Monique Udell of Oregon State University, the study results show that pet parents care for and treat dogs of all ages like human babies.³ She believes this probably helps them be successful living in close companionship with humans.

Do Adult Dogs Ever Respond to Baby Talk (Happy Talk)?

In a 2016 study, researchers concluded that adult dogs listen to both what we say, and how we say it.⁴ When you praise your dog, her brain's "reward center" perks up if your words match your tone of voice. Lead researcher Attila Andics, Ph.D., of Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest explains:

"During speech processing, there is a well-known distribution of labor in the human brain. It is mainly the left hemisphere's job to process word meaning, and the right hemisphere's job to process intonation.

The human brain not only separately analyzes what we say and how we say it, but also integrates the two types of information, to arrive at a unified meaning. Our findings suggest that dogs can also do all that, and they use very similar brain mechanisms."⁵

For the study, 13 dogs were trained to lie completely still for functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain scans so the researchers could analyze their brain activity as they listened to their trainer talk. The dogs were "volunteers," meaning they could leave the experiment at any time.

The trainer praised the dogs using words and phrases such as "good boy," "super" and "well done." The words were spoken in both an upbeat tone and a neutral tone. The trainer also used neutral conjunction words like "however," and "nevertheless" that meant nothing to the dogs.

While the trainer spoke, the researchers checked the scans for regions of the dogs' brains that were able to differentiate between praise words and meaningless words, as well as praise and non-praise (neutral) tones of voice.

The researchers observed that the dogs used the left hemisphere of their brains to process meaningful — but not meaningless — words, and the right hemisphere to process vocal tones.

When You Praise Your Dog, Use an Upbeat Tone of Voice

The research team also observed from the scans that the reward center of the dogs' brains was strongly triggered by praise, but only when the praise was spoken in an encouraging, upbeat tone.

All other combinations of words and vocal tones resulted in much less reward center activity. For example, when the trainer said "good boy" in a neutral tone, or "however" in either a positive or neutral tone, the result was the same — the dogs' reward centers didn't light up. According to Andics:

*"... for dogs, a nice praise can very well work as a reward, but it works best if both words and intonation match. So dogs not only tell apart what we say and how we say it, but they can also combine the two, for a correct interpretation of what those words really meant. Again, this is very similar to what human brains do."*⁶

Sources and References

[Phys.org January 11, 2017](#)

[ScienceDaily January 11, 2017](#)

[Science Magazine January 10, 2017](#)

¹ [Proceedings of the Royal Society B, 11 January 2017, Volume 284, Issue 1846](#)

^{2, 3} [Science Magazine, January 10, 2017](#)

⁴ [Science. 2016 Sep 2;353\(6303\):1030-1032](#)

^{5, 6} [Phys.org, August 30, 2016](#)
