

## Does Your Dog Enjoy This Gesture?

You might believe your dog loves this gesture, but research reveals it can lead to significant stress. Discover the warning signs and learn better ways to show affection.

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many pet parents are surprised to discover their very huggable dogs probably aren't crazy about being hugged
- Dogs aren't built for hugging, they're built for running, which they can't do while being hugged (constrained); this can trigger discomfort and stress in some canine companions
- Some dogs appear comfortable with hugs; it's important to carefully observe your dog and others you interact with to determine the types of touch they do and don't like
- Most dogs prefer petting to hugs, and research suggests they enjoy having their chests and shoulders petted, as well as the end of the spine just in front of the tail
- In all interactions with our animal companions, we should pay attention to the impact we're having on them, as each is an individual

Most people are aware that humans and dogs communicate very differently, so it goes without saying that these differences extend to the ways in which we show affection.

While most dog parents enjoy being physically close with their pets, and vice versa, there are certain types of physical contact that feel very natural to us, but not natural at all to our dogs. One of these is hugging.

Humans are built for hugging. We stand erect and have arms instead of front legs, whereas dogs stand on all fours and have no arms. Since the physical structure of canines makes it virtually impossible for them to initiate or return hugs, it suggests hugging isn't natural for them.

If you're thinking, "Nonsense! My dog loves it when I hug him," chances are he's simply learned to tolerate it. Dogs who seem to enjoy being hugged are probably being good boys (or girls) who put up uncomplainingly with all their human's odd behaviors.

In reality, our dogs haven't a clue what we're doing when we hug them, but they trust us and love us unconditionally, so they don't put up a fuss.

### Why Hugs Can Trigger Stress in Dogs

Dogs are cursorial animals, meaning their limbs are adapted for running. Dogs in the wild spend a lot of time running — running after food, for example, or running from predators. When you hug your furry friend, you restrict her and remove her ability to escape, and for many dogs, this is a **stress trigger**.

Psychology professor and neuropsychological researcher Stanley Coren, Ph.D., author of the best-selling book “The Intelligence of Dogs,” in an article for Psychology Today, explains it this way:

*“... [I]n times of stress or threat the first line of defense that a dog uses is not his teeth, but rather his ability to run away. Behaviorists believe that depriving a dog of that course of action by immobilizing him with a hug can increase his stress level and, if the dog's anxiety becomes significantly intense, he may bite.”<sup>1</sup>*

Coren, surprised to find so little published literature on a concept that is common knowledge among behaviorists, used an internet search engine to locate 250 random photos of people hugging dogs. The images had to clearly show the dog's face and could not involve other factors that might raise a dog's stress level.

He studied the photos and found that nearly 82% showed dogs displaying at least one sign of **stress, discomfort or anxiety**. Signs of stress include tongue-flicking, ears lowered, face averted, eyes showing “half-moons” of white, mouth tightly closed, rigid facial muscles, and furrowed brows.<sup>2</sup>

Just under 11% of the photos showed dogs who appeared neutral or ambivalent about being hugged, while just over 7% showed dogs that appeared comfortable with the hug (e.g., the dogs displayed open mouths, relaxed facial muscles, and no signs of stress).<sup>3</sup>

*“I can summarize the data quite simply by saying that the results indicated that the internet contains many pictures of happy people hugging what appear to be unhappy dogs,” Coren wrote.*

According to Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist and Certified Professional Dog Trainer Karen London, who reviewed Coren's analysis:

*“These results aren't surprising. Based on my behavior and training experience, I'm inclined to agree that the majority of dogs are not as crazy about hugs as people are. The pictures reviewed by Coren might even underestimate dogs' dislike for hugging because the pictures were posted by people who presumably want to show their love for their dogs. Coren points out that they are not likely to choose photos that show their dog's most blatant signs of distress, at least not if they recognize those signs.”<sup>4</sup>*

## **Some Dogs Are Okay With Hugs**

Not everyone agrees with Coren. For example, as companion animal behavior therapist Corey Cohen told the New York Times, “My dogs love being hugged.”<sup>5</sup> He says when he hugs his dog, the dog's breathing slows and his gaze softens, which are signs of tension release. Some dogs even appear to smile when hugged. The difference may be due to trust and the depth of your relationship with the dog being hugged.

*“Over the years, I have had countless clients — in private consultations and in classes — who swear that their dogs do like being hugged,” London writes. “However, whenever they embraced their dog to demonstrate, I identified signs of stress. It's very common for people, especially children, to be bit while hugging a dog, unaware of the stress signals.”<sup>6</sup>*

I think it also has to do with a dog's individual personality. Just as there are some people who don't enjoy being hugged, I think there are some dogs that simply prefer petting over hugging.

So even if you're convinced your own dog is comfortable being hugged, or even shows signs she enjoys it, in reality, she may not. I recommend taking the time to carefully note her response to your hugs, even subtle changes, and stop if she seems uncomfortable. It's generally not a good idea to hug a dog you don't know.

It's not only hugs that can be stressful to dogs, by the way. Petting your dog in certain places, like on the head or paw, may also be unpleasant for her.<sup>7</sup>

## Most Dogs Respond Negatively When Constrained

A 2014 study evaluated the physiological and behavioral responses in dogs to determine which types of petting felt good to them, and which didn't.<sup>8</sup> When the dogs were petted on the head or paw, they showed appeasement signals and redirected behaviors. The researchers interpreted those reactions as signs the dogs were uncomfortable.

It's worth noting that appeasement signals aren't always indicators of stress. According to Whole Dog Journal:

*"They are important everyday communication tools for keeping peace in social hierarchies, and are often presented in calm, stress-free interactions. They are offered in a social interaction to promote the tranquility of the group and the safety of the group's members. When offered in conjunction with other behaviors, they can be an indicator of stress as well."<sup>9</sup>*

When the dogs were constrained by being held while lying on the ground, held by the collar, or having their muzzle covered, unsurprisingly, they showed freezing and displacement behaviors. These included lifting a paw, looking or moving away, and lip licking. All the dogs also had elevated heart rates — a clear sign of stress.

When the interactions were over, the dogs immediately **shook their bodies** and stretched, which are signs of relief and further proof they didn't enjoy being constrained, no matter how gentle the touch. It's worth noting that some dogs surely feel constrained during hugging.

The touches the dogs liked included having their chests and shoulders petted and getting a nice scratch at the end of the spine just in front of the tail.

## Tips for Human-Dog Hugging and Affection

London offers a few pointers on hugging and general affection with dogs:

- **Cuddling vs. hugging** — Your dog may like to snuggle and lean against you, but this is quite different from hugging in which you wrap your arms around her.
- **Gentle hugging** — A gentler hug that is not as long, tight, or high up on the neck may be easier for your dog to accept.
- **Affection from children** — Kids are more likely to squeeze too aggressively and hang on a dog's neck, so be sure to carefully monitor your dog for signs of distress in the presence of children.
- **Your dog initiates a "hug"** — A large or giant breed dog may stand on his back legs and put his front paws on your shoulders in a semi-hug. Keep in mind that this is different from receiving a hug.
- **Situational awareness** — Don't try to hug your dog when she's busy with an activity, especially eating, or if she doesn't appear to be in a receptive mood for some other reason.

- **Don't hug unfamiliar dogs** — While this should be obvious, don't hug dogs you don't know very well. Hugging unfamiliar dogs is a risky proposition that could lead to dog bites.

In all interactions with our animal companions, we should pay attention to the impact we're having on them and most importantly, be respectful of who they are. Each dog is an individual, and while one dog may love a vigorous rubdown, another may be completely stressed out by that type of handling.

Additionally, there are some dogs that experience anxiety and fear when approached by strangers, in general. There's an organization trying to promote the identification of these dogs from a distance by using a yellow ribbon on a leash, through **The Yellow Dog Project**, which I wholeheartedly endorse.

By observing your dog's reaction to physical contact and following his lead, you can enhance your bond with him and forge a more positive relationship.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [Psychology Today April 13, 2016](#)

<sup>2,3,4,6</sup> [The Wildest, August 4, 2022](#)

<sup>5</sup> [The New York Times April 27, 2016](#)

<sup>7,8</sup> [Kuhne, F. et al. Journal of Veterinary Behavior, May-June 2014, Vol 9, Iss 3, pp 93-97](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Whole Dog Journal, July 20, 2011](#)

---