

# Petting: What Your Dog Craves Most from You

This study may come as a surprise, even if you believe you're doing everything 'right.' Without exception, when given a choice between their owner and a complete stranger, the person who did this always won the dog's heart and attention. Is your pup getting enough?

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A study confirms what dog lovers have known forever — dogs love to be petted and most can't get enough of it
- Study researchers observed both shelter and family dogs in an experiment that had the dogs choose whether to spend time with a person who gave them vocal praise or a person who petted them
- Without exception, the dogs chose to hang out with the people doing the petting, even when the person praising them was their owner, and the petting person was a stranger
- These study results suggest that dogs' preference for petting as positive reinforcement is a natural response, whereas the use of praise to reinforce desirable behavior is more effective when paired with an additional incentive like food or petting

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published April 1, 2015.***

For all you dog lovers out there, this news will come as absolutely no surprise: your canine companion loves to be petted! He even loves it more than praise.

This reality of every dog guardian's life is now backed up by a study in the journal *Behavioural Processes*.<sup>1</sup> Two researchers from the University of Florida decided to investigate whether dogs favor petting over verbal praise. They also wanted to know if it mattered to the dogs who did the petting or offered praise — their owner or a person unfamiliar to them.

## Pet-or-Praise Experiment Involved Both Shelter and Family Dogs

For the experiment, the UF researchers worked with three groups of dogs — shelter dogs, family dogs tested with strangers, and family dogs tested with their owners.

Each dog was brought into a room on leash to meet two assistants sitting in chairs. For the first two groups of dogs, both assistants were strangers, but for the third group, one assistant was a stranger and the other was the dog's owner. One of the two assistants greeted the dog with praise, while the other assistant's greeting involved petting.

The dog was then taken to a point in the room an equal distance from both assistants, the leash was removed, and the dog's voluntary interaction with each assistant was measured in 10-minute sessions.

During each session, the assistants offered either praise only, or petting only for 5 minutes. Then they switched roles for the remaining 5 minutes. The dogs were measured according to the physical closeness and amount of time spent with each assistant.

## **Pet Me and I'll Follow You Anywhere**

The results of the experiment were crystal clear: every single dog preferred petting to verbal praise. Not only did the dogs spend more time with the person doing the petting, they did so even when it was their owner doing the praising, and a stranger doing the petting. And when the assistants switched places halfway through the session, the dogs invariably stayed with the petting person. It's possible that one of the reasons dogs dig petting so much is because their heart rate and blood pressure are lowered by human petting.<sup>2</sup>

So whether it's shelter dogs or family dogs, and whether they are with their own humans or unfamiliar humans, dogs will choose petting over praise every time. They can't get enough of it, either. And while verbal praise temporarily interested the dogs, it didn't rank much higher than no interaction at all.

According to the UF study authors, these results confirm that petting provides positive reinforcement for canine behavior. Being petted is likely a naturally occurring reinforcing stimulus for dogs, whereas praise alone isn't effective and may need to be paired with petting or food.<sup>3</sup>

## **Sources and References**

<sup>1</sup> [Behavioural Processes, Vol. 110, January 2015, pp 47-59](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Conditional Reflex: A Pavlovian Journal of Research & Therapy, 1968, Vol. 3, Iss. 2, pp 69-80](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior, May 2014, Vol. 101, Iss. 3, pp 385-405](#)

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