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Age, breed and sex influences dogs' performance in eye contact training – preliminary results

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Eye contact (EC) plays a crucial role in dog-human communication. For example, dogs follow human gestures preceded by EC more easily than those without. However, the dogs' willingness to establish EC with humans could differ according to their sex, age and breed function. We clicker-trained dogs (N=128; 63 males; 3-15 years) to establish EC with an unfamiliar human and measured the latency to complete the training (20x EC or max 300s). Females may have a greater tendency to participate in social interactions, as it occurs in humans, thus they may learn this task faster. There is an age-related decline in attention and learning ability, so older dogs may learn the task slower. Additionally, we grouped the dogs based on their breed function: visually cooperative (i.e. bred for visual communication with human; N=41), non-cooperative (N=31) and mixed breeds (N=56). We hypothesized that cooperative dogs may learn the task faster, because they are more eager to establish EC with humans. We found that females and younger dogs reached the training criteria faster than males and older dogs, furthermore cooperative and mixed breeds were more successful than non-cooperative breeds. Females may have outperformed males because they are more willing to participate in social interactions. The age-related decline in learning ability might have affected older dogs' trainability in this task, which caused the poorer performance. Finally, the cooperative and mixed breeds might have been more eager to establish EC with the experimenter, thus they learnt the task faster. Our results suggest that the ability to learn EC depends on the dogs' basic willingness and age-related learning ability.

