

Preschool Children Require Fewer Instructional Prompts to Perform a Memory Task in the Presence of a Dog

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This paper presents two experiments that examined memory performance and adherence to instructions for a group of preschool children ($n = 12$) in the presence of a well-behaved real dog, a stuffed dog, and a human confederate. The children were shown 10 objects in each condition. At test, the children were shown each original object along with a distracter and asked to select the one they had seen before. As we expected, object recognition performance was at ceiling and no effects were significant. Instructional prompts were recorded in two ways: General prompts included general instructions like "Face this way," whereas Task Specific prompts directed the child to perform specific aspects of the task like "Pick one of these objects." The first experiment involved the use of three-dimensional objects and we found that for both types of prompts, fewer prompts were needed in the Real Dog condition, followed by the Stuffed Dog condition, and the greatest number of prompts was needed in the Human condition. The second experiment involved the use of pictures of three-dimensional objects. Again, for both types of prompts, fewer prompts were needed in the Real Dog condition relative to the other two conditions. The results of these experiments indicate that the presence of a well-trained dog reduces the need for instructional prompts in a traditional cognitive task— object recognition—for preschool children. The common assumption that the presence of a dog can be distracting for children during the execution of cognitive tasks appears to be false.

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