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If you talk to your dog in a high-pitched, sing-song voice, it's not very helpful after your dog grows up. But if you use "dog-speak," you and your dog will become closer friends, according to a new studies.

We've all done it, talked to puppies like they were babies. It's natural. They're terrifically cute and when we talk like that, they eagerly respond. While they're little whirling dervishes, it's hard to hold their attention so we do whatever works.

But if I use the same high-pitched, chirpy voice on an adult dog like Oona, say, she gives me a withering look as if to say, "Puppy wuppy thinks you need to check your meds, dad." They shut you out.

The thing is, we both ache to communicate with one another. But as smart as our hounds are, their grasp of human language is limited. The average dog has a working vocabulary of about 100 human words. No, they don't actually speak them *back* to you, but they know what they mean. They tag words like "food," "park," and "walk" with mental pictures. Every other word you use like "would you like to..." are just empty filler to them.

There's an hilarious episode of the class sitcom "Frazier" in which Frazier Crane and his brother Niles are having a serious discussion about their dog Eddie's behavior in the dog park. The camera then switches to Eddie's point of view and we hear "Yadda yadda yadda *Eddie!* Yadda yadda yadda *Eddie!*"

So, only a few of our words are "hot" words laden with meaning to our hounds. It's the talk they focus on. But it's not all.

*How* you talk is useful to your dog, too. England's University of York experimented with speech interaction between people and their dogs earlier this year and found that using baby talk on puppies gets their attention, but older dogs ignore it.

They want to understand you. You're the center of your dog's world. But as their brain grows, they need content, not just simply enthusiasm. The York study concluded that "dog speak" is what you need to be using.

So use those hot words. Teach them more, too. Expand their vocabulary gradually and intentionally. You may be surprised how many words they can assimilate. One language savant, a border collie named Chaser, knows more than 1,000 words, including the names of every toy used with him in lab tests.

You'll probably feel a little silly and stilted using sentences like "Spot go park?" So go ahead and talk normally, using all those filler

words you'd use with another human. Spot will figure it out.

More importantly, use a natural tone with adult dogs. They may not grasp all your words, but your tone speaks volumes. By the time they're grown, they've learned to read the emotions in your speech. They know if they're in trouble. They know if they're loved. They can tell if you're distracted or bored.

And they'll read the false tone in your voice if you chatter on to your grown dog in baby talk and say, "Ohhhh, is baby girl in *trouble*?" Baby girl probably already knows she's in trouble, but she's confused by your tone. Should she spit out the cat or are you suddenly okay with it? You're not only sending mixed messages, you're undermining their confidence and trust in you.

So I carry on long conversations with Oona in a normal tone of voice. She cocks an ear and sifts out the part that applies to her. She can hear the affection in my voice. I can see her loving reply in her eyes. We know each other.

Oisin is younger and less certain. He's still coming out of his juvenile hormonal haze, but he's starting to realize that, yes, I *am* talking to him and those sounds are clues. I talk to him in a slightly higher, sweeter tone reserved just for him. It gets his attention now. I can tell by the cock of his head. And slowly we're moving to a normal tone of voice.

Keep talking to them, naturally and sincerely. They're listening. They understand more than you may know. Friends do.