

Why Do We Love Our Pets So Much?
Daniel Estep, Ph.D. and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D.
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For many people, their pets are members of the family. Many of our clients tell us their pets are like children to them, a perspective we can personally appreciate. What is it about dogs, cats, horses and other companion animals that cause us to become so attached to them?

The human-companion animal bond has been studied scientifically for about the last 20 years. Although there are still many unanswered questions, we now have a better understanding about the factors that contribute to the formation of attachments, from both the human's as well as the animal's side of the bond.

One important factor is shared communication. The greater the similarity in communication systems between two species, the more likely they are to treat each other as social peers, and the more likely attachments are to form. In general, that explains why we are more likely to become attached to a dog than say a pet snail.

Dogs have highly developed social systems just as humans do. Horses are also highly social, but just because of their physical structure, their communication signals are not as similar to humans as those of dogs.

Cats do not have the highly structured social system of dogs and humans, but there is enough similarity in their communications to facilitate strong attachments. For the same reason, a dog is more likely to become attached to people than a hamster would be.

Separation anxiety problems, in which an animal becomes very distressed when separated from its owner, are very common in dogs and birds, relatively rare in cats, and virtually unheard of in small mammals such as hamsters.

Anthropomorphism, the attribution of human characteristics to animals, is also likely to influence the strength of our attachment, either positively or negatively. For example, a client once told us her dog was the most polite animal on earth because the dog wouldn't eat until other family members had started eating. This behavior contributed to the woman's special feelings for the dog. From the dog's point of view, this behavior was really social facilitation, meaning that the dog was eating because that's what the rest of its social group was doing.

Alternatively, many people accuse their pets of misbehaving out of spite or revenge, to "show them" or "get back at them", even though this is not a behavioral accurate interpretation. Such beliefs may have a negative affect on attachment from the human's perspective, because it is more difficult to care about someone who you think is "out to get you!"

The animal counter part of anthropomorphism is zoomorphism which is an animal's tendency to perceive and behave toward humans as though they were members of its own species. It is not known whether there are specific human behaviors that can make an animal more likely to become strongly attached to us. In our next column we'll discuss two additional factors - neoteny and familiarity.