

Can You Love Your Pet Too Much?
Daniel Estep, Ph.D. and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D.
www.AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com
Copyright ABA, Inc.

Bill and Mary haven't been on a vacation without their dog since they acquired him almost two years ago. He was rescued as a puppy, isn't well socialized and is too fearful to be boarded or be in the house alone with someone else.

John and Suzi drove their adult Akita cross country to help them choose an Akita pup. They could have flown to pick the puppy up and returned in a day a half, but because they wanted Lucas to be part of the decision, the trip took a week by car. Which pup they picked would be based on how Lucas reacted to each puppy.

Lucy takes her cat Amos for a leash walk every night. Amos doesn't always want to go home when Lucy does, and will bite her if she attempts to end his walk before he is ready. Amos sometimes isn't ready to go home for an hour, but Lucy patiently waits until she can safely walk him home.

Ann feels guilty whenever she leaves her dog Foxy alone, even if it's just to run to the store for a few minutes. To help Foxy, Ann and her husband decided to acquire a puppy companion for Foxy. They've had Jake for a week, and now Ann is even more worried that she's done a bad thing. Foxy's routine has been upset, and Jake is trying to hog all of Foxy's toys. Ann is distressed, because she doesn't know what's best for Foxy.

Although the names have been changed, these are all actual events, as described to us by some of our clients. Do these choices sound extreme to you, or are they fairly similar to what you would be willing to do for your pet?

On an upcoming radio show, we'll talk about Pet Love: Do Americans Love Their Pets Too Much? There is a significant scientific literature on the positive effects of the human-companion animal bond. For example, people are more likely to approach and talk to individuals in wheelchairs if they are accompanied by a service dog, than if they are not. After a heart attack, dog owners had a better chance of recovery than non-dog owners, even after the possible effects of increased exercise by walking the dog had been taken into account. People in assisted living facilities where pets were residents reported fewer doctors appointments and less use of medication than facilities without pets.

The majority of most pet owners surveyed indicate their pet is like a member of the family. That's certainly true for our friends and for us. We've seen bumper stickers that say "Ask About My Grand Dog", which certainly is a good example of the status of many pets in our society.

Pets are much more likely to add to the quality of our lives than detract from them. Occasionally we see families where their pet's aggressive behavior is putting their safety in jeopardy, or the quality of the family's life has decreased because of the sacrifices they have to make to manage their pets behavior problem. But these are the exceptions, not the rule.

So, enjoy the benefits your pet is most likely bringing to your life and don't be worried about loving them too much.

Edited version first published in the Rocky Mountain News, Denver, CO.
Any use of this article must cite the authors and the Rocky Mountain News

Tune into KNRC, AM 1510 on Saturday, March 8 at 10:30 am to the “ Style Matters Live!” call in show hosted by Judie Schwartz and Evelinda Urman to hear Dr. Hetts talk and take questions about how and why we love our pets.

**Edited version first published in the Rocky Mountain News, Denver, CO.
Any use of this article must cite the authors and the Rocky Mountain News**