

Dog Love: What's It All About?

A look at why we love our dogs so much.

By Cherie Langlois

Illustrations by Tom KimballEverybody loves Jake. You see it in the smiling faces of PetSmart visitors pausing to greet the graceful German Shepherd Dog, and in the wiggling wags of puppies he welcomes to classes taught by trainer Jennifer Lewis of Orting, Wash. A certified therapy dog and Canine Good Citizen, Jake returns the attention with gentle good humor: barking his age for some captivated teens, grinning as a tot toddles over, dropping down to play with a mini Dachshund.

But you can tell his heart belongs to Lewis, who adopted him as a rescue puppy six years ago. "Jake does anything I ask of him, and often I don't even need to ask him — he just knows what I want him to do," she says. "In class, Jake socializes puppies and keeps the peace, and he does it all on his own. He's a really special, engaging dog."

We may not all have canine pals as popular and obedient as Jake, but every dog lover can relate to the heart tug of this powerful bond. How did our two species fall for each other, and why? Come explore this amazing connection.

Beginning of a bond

Although scientists and archaeologists still debate when and where domestic dogs evolved from the gray wolf, most everyone agrees on this: Dogs — our first domesticated animal — formed a close bond with humans about 14,000 to 17,000 years ago. Some experts theorize early hunters initiated the relationship when they toted home and raised orphaned, too-cute-to-resist wolf pups. Others think bolder wolves made the first advances by hanging around habitations to scavenge leftovers.

After researching the biological basis of the human-animal bond for 16 years, Meg Daley Olmert of Wittman, Md., author of "Made for Each Other, The Biology of the Human-Animal Bond" (Da Capo Press, 2009), believes it was woman who first felt the overpowering urge to take care of a crying wolf pup. "This friendly contact could have kick-started a potent oxytocin hormone feedback system that tamed wolves and charmed humans into keeping them close and feeding them," she says.

According to Olmert, oxytocin, a hormone found in mammals, suppresses the fear response and lowers blood pressure, heart rate, and stress hormone levels. It creates a calm connection and powerful anti-stress effect that instigates and rewards social interactions.

"Oxytocin has been proven to promote social recognition — like between mother and child — and create a broader sense of relatedness within and between species," she says. "This is how wolves and humans came to see one another as best friends."

In any case, these tamer wolves would have made useful sentries and perhaps hunting partners in exchange for food and security. "Initially, I think what we got out of wolves was the companionship of a good night's sleep!" Olmert says. With their trusty dogs on the lookout for predators or enemies, our early ancestors probably experienced some peaceful rest.

It would have taken only 100 to 150 years to produce domesticated dogs, once people started aggressively selecting for tamer wolves around their villages, says Alan Beck, professor at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., and director of its Center for the Human-Animal Bond. "The breeds initially reflected special roles that early people had for dogs, such as pulling, guarding, and herding," he says.

Dogs also served, as they do now, as mankind's best friend. Exactly when dogs transitioned from useful animals to companions we might never know. And for much of history, working dogs certainly outnumbered pets. According to Stanley Coren, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the University of British Columbia, small, companion-only canines also usually belonged to privileged people, like Frederick the Great of Prussia (1712-1786), who apparently had a wing of his palace designated for his Italian Greyhounds.

Today, though many dogs still work for a living, most occupy a companion role in the United States. In fact, an ever

increasing number of citizens consider — and adore — their pets as family. Another nice change from the old days: You don't have to be royalty to keep a dog simply for love.

Too Much Love?

You dote on your dog, take him everywhere, shower him with toys and bling, and rave about his fetching qualities. Has your love gone overboard?

Not unless it starts to interfere with other human relationships, your normal day-to-day functioning, your finances, or your pet's health, says psychologist Stanley Coren, Ph.D. "Lots of high-profile people have had an extraordinary fondness for their dogs and functioned quite normally, like General George Patton and President Lyndon Johnson," he says.

Why do I love thee, dog?

The explanation for why we love dogs is more complex. Let us count some of the ways.

Biology: Friendly interactions between our two species feel good. "All kinds of friendly, nurturing interactions release the mammalian hormone oxytocin in humans and dogs — even mere eye contact," Olmert says.

Companionship: We made dogs into our best friends. Humans created dogs to be companions, Coren says. "We've been systematically modifying them for at least 14,000 years, and in such a way that they've become better companions to us than just about any other creature except another human being."

Communication: Dogs respond to our emotions and body language. Part of what makes dogs such easy-to-love pals involves how well they respond to us and understand our gestures. For example, recent studies indicate that if you point at something, your dog will look to where you point; a wolf will only stare at your hand. "We've bred companion dogs to be empathic," Coren says. "They can read our moods and subtle aspects of our body language, which is why some people think dogs have ESP."

Looks: Dogs never grow up. Pedomorphosis, the retention of juvenile characteristics in an adult, is a hallmark of domesticated animals. These juvenile characteristics include physical attributes that automatically make us go ga-ga — think flattened faces and large round eyes — along with behavioral characteristics such as playfulness and reduced aggression.

"Pedomorphic features protect a young animal from the aggressiveness of the parent," Beck says. "It's part and parcel of our selection for tameability. You end up with animals locked in a juvenile state, and it triggers positive feelings, so you breed more individuals like that."

Interaction: We treat dogs like people. Yes, we all talk to our dogs. We also go jogging or play Frisbee with our pets, and caress them — behaviors normally reserved for other humans, Beck says. "But many of these behaviors occur with less risk," he says. "Dogs never criticize what you say, and they're almost always happy to be in your company."

Right now, Jake and Lewis look equally happy in each other's company. "I love having Jake at work," Lewis says. "I appreciate him even more after he couldn't be with me during his recovery from hip replacement surgery last year. I felt naked without him here."

He loves me, he loves me not

Just as various relationships exist between people, we modern humans have different ways of relating to our dogs. Compare the "Hey, it's just a dog" person to the "Oh, my sweet baby-kins!" individual.

How people relate to their canine friends depends greatly on where they happen to be in their lifetime, Coren notes. The dogs of our childhood often serve as substitute siblings or playmates. As adults, we may see our pets as exercise buddies, playmates for our kids, or beloved surrogate children. In our golden years, pets are often steadfast friends guarding us against loneliness. "For older individuals, this relationship is quite important, because older people tend to become more isolated," Coren says. "Dogs give us this wonderful feeling that we're not alone."

Cherie Langlois regularly contributes to DOG FANCY. She shares her Washington home and her heart with two loving canines, Pippin and Daisy.