

# How to Really Love Your Dog (or Cat)

article by Jan Evans

*You love your pet – there's no doubt about that. But do you know how to show that love, so your dog or cat can understand your affection?*

## Love Means Learning to Communicate



Your dog or cat communicates primarily with body language. It's obvious when your dog is happy to see you as she demonstrates her delight with soft eyes, attentive ears and a wagging tail. Because human 'tails' don't wag as well, you express your pleasure with words. High pitched sounds excite dogs (as they mimic rodent squeaks), so if your dog is hyper-excited when you arrive, tone down your voice until her energy level has matched yours.

When you want your dog to be energized, bring your energy up and use the higher-pitched 'baby talk.' If you've wondered why your dog takes so long to settle down after separation, consider your energy level, tone of voice and the cadence of your words. Observe your dog and give her what she likes. Some dogs love pats on the head while others prefer a soft stroke on the shoulder or back. Perhaps your dog appreciates a massage along her spine or hindquarters. Domestic dogs tolerate much from their humans, so it's up to you to determine what your dog really likes.

Cats are usually less demonstrative in their behavior than dogs, but they are glad to see you – if you haven't disturbed their nap. As with dogs, cats have preferences where they want to be touched, and are less tolerant of humans who don't take the hint. Some cats are very sensitive about their whiskers while others like to be scratched around them. Go gently and let your cat show you what she wants.

## Love Means Healthy Food

Keeping your dog and cat fit and at a healthy weight will ensure less illness visits to the veterinarian. Although high quality food can be more expensive, your pet will benefit over the long run.

If you invest in good food, be sure to feed enough, but not too much. Obesity in pets is rampant and causes problems that range from diabetes to joint degeneration. Your dog and cat should have enough fat to cover their ribs so they don't show in short-haired animals. You can weigh your pet or take photos, so you can see the changes that can happen so gradually that they are hard to notice.

## Love Means Being a Leader

Because dogs are pack animals, they need leadership. Dogs that are insecure and show it through excessive barking or cowering are especially in need of benign leadership. This is not a dictatorship where any infraction of the leader's commands are met with punishment, but true leadership involves teaching proper responses and confidence. If your dog suffers from anxiety you'll want to look at your confidence in dealing with your dog. When your dog barks, calmly tell him that you'll take care of the problem. If you ignore or correct your dog every time he sounds the alarm, he'll probably bark excessively because you haven't taken charge of the situation. Eventually your lack of leadership may result in barking whenever you leave the house—or even the room. Most bad behavior in dogs stems from lack of leadership.

Although cats are more solitary creatures than dogs, they also benefit from leadership. Cats can be very demanding, and unless you love bending to their every whim, it's important to train your cat before he trains you. This can be accomplished by making his idea into your idea before he starts making demands. If your cat insists on getting under the bedcovers with you—change his behavior by asking him to get under the covers before he starts scratching at the bedclothes. In this way, you are inviting him before he demands.

Any behavior that you find endearing can be 'turned around', so that you are leader instead of your cat. Cats don't suffer the anxiety of lack of leadership that dogs do, but if your cat views you as a leader you'll be able to accomplish unpleasant tasks such as nail clipping, administering medications, dressing wounds or even grooming with less drama and discomfort for both of you.

## Love Means Providing Play

Your dog needs rest and relaxation as much as you do. Most dogs get plenty of rest and need more stimulation, so they can relax. Dogs normally sleep 12 to 18 hours each day. Short bouts of intense exercise mimic hunting behavior, so are most beneficial. Fetch is a good game for many breeds of dogs. Even if your dog won't bring the object back, most will chase a thrown ball. Just have several items to throw for her to chase, throw them across the yard, then go to where they've fallen and start over.





Travel is another natural activity for dogs. Taking your dog for an on leash walk regularly provides exercise and gives her an opportunity to know the neighborhood. Of course, a pleasant walk for you and your dog requires training and leadership, so you both can enjoy your time together. If your cat lives indoors, you can stimulate him with toys, balls or a laser pointer. Cats can actually be taught to fetch if you're patient enough to reward the 'bring back' behavior.

## Love Means Companionship



Because dogs are pack animals they need company. Most dogs feel anxious when they are alone, so it's important to provide human or animal companionship. Some dogs are perfectly content with other animals as companions if they are introduced when the dogs are young.

Cats are more solitary and are often content to be only pets. If your cat is left alone for long periods another cat can provide company and diversion. Neutered male cats create strong bonds when they grow up together.

## Love Means Positive Reinforcement

Dogs and cats do not understand punishment or "No!" It's your responsibility as the human with the huge brain to 'catch him doing something right' and positively reinforce the behavior with a reward that motivates him. When you use "No!" it has no meaning to your animal. Instead, give him something to do. If the cat jumps on the counter, quietly pick him up and put him on the floor with the command, "Get Down." If your dog barks incessantly when the doorbell rings, tell him, "I'll take care of it. Get in your bed," and put him in his bed or other safe spot.

## Love Means Taking the Time for Training



When you bring an animal into your life, you have expectations—a positive picture of your life together. If you get a dog as a running partner, be sure to take the time to learn how to train your dog to run with you safely, and invest the time in training. Just as humans learn to walk before they run—teach your dog to walk with you and accept you as leader, so you don't end up chasing your dog through the neighborhood. It's a race you're not likely to win, and it's dangerous for your dog.

If you want a lap cat, choose a cat that enjoys human body warmth. You can train a cat to sit on your lap by enticing her with a tasty treat until your cat understands the benefits of your presence. Learning requires confidence. If your cat or dog comes from less than loving circumstances, you may have to forego training until she feels safe and comfortable with you in your home.

## Love Means Consistency

You are always training your dog or cat whether you mean to or not. They understand your responses to their behavior, so if you laugh at the puppy trying to jump onto the couch remember that laughter is positive reinforcement. When the pup grows big enough to actually get up onto the couch, you have taught him that it's the right thing to do. Think about the behavior that you're teaching and what it means.

Your dog can't tell the difference between a worn out sock and a new one, so if you don't want her to chew your good socks, don't give her an old one to play with or be sure to keep your good socks out of puppy's reach. Your kitten doesn't know that your new scarf is any different than the old one you gave him to play with.

## Love Means a Forever Home



Learning how to really love your dog or cat from their point of view will ensure that you can provide a forever home for your animal. When more people realize that these wonderful sentient beings have unique personalities and needs specific to their species and breeds and strive to provide their needs, there will be fewer cats and dogs in shelters and rescues as they will all be living happily ever after in loving homes.