

What's Behind the Bond?
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In our last column we discussed how shared communication can strengthen the human-companion animal bond. Neotenic characteristics which pets display also tend to contribute to our attachment to them. Neoteny is the persistence of infantile or juvenile characteristics into adulthood.

Because companion animals are neotenized versions of their wild ancestors, they look and act more like juvenile than adult wild animals. Neotenic characteristics can be physical, such as big eyes, a shortened nose or muzzle and a rounded forehead; or behavioral such as a willingness to play and to readily bark, meow or make other kinds of species typical vocalizations.

The physical appearance of toy breeds of dogs such as Pekinese and Pomeranians as well as Persian and Himalayan cats are some of the best examples of physical neoteny. Neotenic characteristics make animals appear and act cute and make us want to take care of them.

All other things being equal, the more time we spend with our pets, the more attached we become to them. During this shared time, if pleasant interactions are occurring, the bond will strengthen even further. In other words, the more we enjoy being around our pets, the more attached we become to them.

Animals also tend to form stronger attachments to the individuals they spend the most time with and have enjoyable interactions with. What you enjoy doing with your pet may not always be the most enjoyable for him. You may enjoy quiet time on the couch, but your dog or cat may much prefer an active game of fetch or chase the feather.

A strong bond may never form between people and pets who are kept primarily outdoors and don't get much attention. To maximize the bond for both of you, have your pet be part of your family life rather than relegated to the backyard, and try to include your pet's favorite activities into your normal routine.