

Canine Training Partnerships and the Human Animal Bond

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Everyone that owns a dog looks forward to the time that they come home at night and see them waiting with a wagging tail and bright eyes. It's a natural response. When we see our pet is happy, it can make us happy; and new research in the field of the Human-Animal Bond (HAB) supports this now more than ever.



Photo provided by A. Plover

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) defines the Human-Animal Bond as "a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both." The benefits of this bond between owners and pets have been commonly demonstrated in military veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) who are paired with a psychiatric service dog. These dogs serve the purpose of providing comfort and stability in periods of emotional turmoil. Recent research has been performed on the effects of pets in the household in youth development. In general, it has been demonstrated that youth living in households with the presence of companion animals were associated with more positive indices of development. And research is now suggesting that the human animal bond can reach past the level of companion animal ownership and extend to animals in zoological parks and even wildlife.

Aiding in the bond between owners and their pets are training partnerships. These partnerships can range from training simple commands (sit, stay) to competing in athletic events (barn hunt, agility, lure coursing) and beyond.

Training commands and tricks can be a fun and interactive way to mentally stimulate your dog. Training can be done utilizing a variety of methods including treats, clickers, toys, etc. Common commands include sit, stay and lay down, and tricks such as roll over, beg, and shake. Creativity in combining and inventing your own commands with your pet are sure to draw a crowd. Barn hunt takes many dogs back to their traditional hunting roots. In barn hunt, dogs are able to engage in scent tracking and locating the presence of

Canine competing in Agility Trial (provided by A. Plover)



“vermin” while maneuvering through obstacles created by hay bales. Agility is a fast-paced, mentally stimulating and physically engaging sport where competitors and their dogs navigate an obstacle course while racing against the clock. Obstacles can include jumps, weave poles, tunnels, and teeter totters. Lure coursing is a system of mechanized lures that stimulate the drive of chasing live prey. Dogs are actively engaged as they pursue and artificial lure unpredictably zigzagging across an open field.

These are just some of the many training partnership events available to you and your pet. Research can be done with your local area kennel club or any of the national kennel club

websites to find out more. Additionally, contacting your local veterinarian or the MSU-CVM behavior department for information and resources can also be useful.

In general, the time spent interacting with your dog in a positive and fun environment will ultimately strengthen the human animal bond. Canines gravitate towards positive experiences and have a general desire to please their owner. By mentally engaging your pet, you are encouraging the development of trust and enjoyment by your presence. As always, learning some behavior commands is beneficial as well. Likewise are the mental benefits you receive from spending time with your pet. Studies have shown that a strong human animal bond can increase work productivity, activity levels, and a positive outlook on life.

Additionally, outside of the mental benefits, there are a multitude of physical benefits for you and your pet. Obesity is a current epidemic in companion animals today with approximately 40% of dogs considered overweight. Any sort of exercise that gets your pup off of their beds and moving will reduce the likelihood of canine obesity and unwanted weight gain. Staying active and moving can also prevent muscle wasting, cardiovascular disease and joint disease. For further information, please see our article “Companion Animal Obesity”.

In conclusion, research is continually growing and developing to further support the benefits of the human animal bond. Additionally, training partnerships with your pet can enhance both mental and physical benefits for not only your dog, but also yourself.

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