



## **Bonding with Your Pets is a Win-Win!**

Strengthening the bonds you share with your pets is good for them—and for you, too! Just having a pet in your home can reduce your stress and greatly improve the quality of your mental and physical well-being. February is National Pet Owners Month, and here are some good suggestions for you and your pet to bond, develop healthier habits, and discover new ways to live a full life together.

### **Quality Time**

Spend more quality, one-on-one time with your dog or cat, even if just at home watching some TV and cuddling or playing catch. Play time can provide more opportunities to challenge your pets, enrich their lives, and establish an even deeper bond. Make a resolution to play for even 5 or 10 minutes a day, every day; play with a favorite toy or toss a ball with your dog, or play with laser pointers, feather teasers, and jingle balls with your cat.

Did you know that, just like with children, boredom can lead to behavior issues for your pets? Try playing a game with your pets that encourages them to use their smarts. Mind-enriching toys and games can lead to a stronger bond between your family and your pet, while reducing the amount of mischief they get into! Does your pet have a BFF? Set up a play date. Interaction with other animals is great for your pets' mental health and helps them improve their social skills.

### **Try Something New**

Just as we sometimes become tired of repetitive activities, our pets can lose interest in the same old routine, day in and day out. Why not try something new with your pet now and then? Choose a new activity that you can try together, like swimming, hiking, or camping. A visit to the local pet store with your dog or cat to check out the critters in cages and aquariums or to peruse the treats can also be fun.

Many restaurants are now offering dog-friendly seating areas and, during the off-season, more recreation areas are open to dogs. Classes can be fun, too. Try pet agility, Canine Good Citizen, and other classes you can take with your pet. Or, you can simply learn a new game to play. Either way, the new experience will spark your pets' interest, and it will be good for their health, not to mention the quality bonding time you'll enjoy!

### **Teach an Old (or Young) Dog New Tricks**

Make your pet's mental health—and overall behavior—a top priority. Stimulating your pets' minds and challenging them is one of the keys to fulfillment and improved health. Just like humans, they can learn new behaviors and skills throughout their lives. All it might take is a regular training habit. Maybe your puppy breezed through kindergarten but came up short in Obedience 101, or perhaps you have a cat who takes pride in ignoring your orders. Either way, spending just a few minutes each day working on training with your pet (using positive reinforcement) is a simple way to help improve both your pet's manners and quality of life. Try attending training or obedience classes. Not only can classes help put an



end to various behavior problems, but many dogs also enjoy the challenge and the bonding time gained from attending these classes with their owners.

Teaching your pets new tricks and practicing those they already know are great ways to keep those neurons firing. New tricks aren't just for dogs, either. Cats can also be taught tricks, like sit, shake, and give kisses using reward-based training. Plus, consistent training can help boost your cat's or dog's confidence.

### **Get in the Groom Groove**

Keeping your pet clean through regular bathing is important, but try to groom your pet every day or as often as you can. Brushing your pet serves many purposes. It helps distribute oils from the skin to the fur, keeping the coat shiny and healthy. It removes excess fur from the coat and reduces the amount you find on your clothes and furniture. The key is to start early and groom often. Brushing your pet's coat can be a calming activity if done routinely. Another good habit is to get pets used to their feet being touched. This makes trimming nails at home (or at the vet or groomer) that much easier and less stressful.

Not every dog or cat needs a thorough brushing every single day, but setting aside time to either brush your pets or just give them a full-body rubdown has numerous positive effects. For one thing, cats and dogs with fur that mats or sheds heavily can benefit greatly from having loose fur removed on a regular basis. It is also a good way to check for any lumps, bumps, or other concerns. In addition, it's a bonding activity that enables you to connect with your pet in a physical way.

One of the most overlooked grooming activities is brushing teeth. Dental disease affects nearly 85 percent of dogs and cats over three years of age and has significant health consequences. Inflamed and receding gums can occur if teeth are not brushed, causing your pet pain and leading to very expensive medical procedures. It can lead to infection and abscesses in the mouth, as well as affect the heart, liver, and kidneys. So proper oral hygiene is a must. Make sure their teeth are clean by brushing them on a regular basis. This will help prevent tartar and plaque buildup and reduce the risk of tooth loss as pets age. Getting your pets used to teeth brushing will help this become a fun and delicious (with chicken-flavored toothpaste) habit for your pet.

### **Be a Good Neighbor—and Be Good to Yourself**

We've all been there. You are enjoying a walk with your pet, when SQUISH, you've got poo on your shoe. Besides this unfortunate mishap, not cleaning up after pets can lead to diseases spreading all over your neighborhood. Worse yet, many people seem to think it's perfectly fine to allow their pets to roam. Not only is it [illegal](#) for dogs to be at-large, but thousands of strays end up in shelters. Be considerate—your neighbors may not want your dog, or even your cat, in their yard. Make sure your pets are properly contained in your own yard.



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Devoting more time to your pets will help them get the exercise and stimulation they need and deepen your bond with them. Your pet wants to feel loved, and even a busy person can usually spend at least a few minutes a day giving a kitty or pup dedicated attention. A little TLC goes a long way toward their health and happiness—and yours!