

Does your dog love you?

February 17 2014, by Robyn Mills

University of Adelaide researchers are studying the interactions between puppies and their mothers as a first step in being able to analyse the relationship between dog and owner.

Speaking ahead of world 'Love your pet day' on Thursday 20 February, PhD student Veronika Czerwinski says studies conducted into human-dog attachment have relied on observational procedures used for human mothers and babies. Attachment behaviours specific to puppies have not been properly described.

"Dogs and humans have been a part of each other's lives for over 14,000 years, domesticated before agriculture started," says Ms Czerwinski, from the University's School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences at Roseworthy campus. "Over this time we have formed a special bond with [dogs](#) and they have learnt to communicate with humans through responding to our verbal and behavioural cues."

Attachment, Ms Czerwinski says, is more than just a bond. It has the additional critical components of seeking comfort and security.

But while there are well-validated tests for analysing the attachment between a human mother or caregiver and baby, this isn't the case with dogs and their owners, she says.

Ms Czerwinski is starting her research by filming and observing Labrador litters from birth to when they go to new homes at eight weeks.

"In dogs, there are many benefits to be gained from ensuring there is a healthy attachment between dog and owner," says Ms Czerwinski's supervisor, Dr Susan Hazel, senior lecturer in animal behaviour at the School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences.

"For instance, when the attachment is not normal a puppy is more likely to end up back in an animal shelter and problems that dogs have in later life may well stem from that first relationship. A really good relationship between dog and owner offers all sorts of health and social benefits for people with dogs."

Dr Hazel says the study may help to define the importance of the relationship between puppy and mother, and assist breeders in selecting breeding stock. It may also help in matching dogs and owners.

"Describing the attachment behaviours between puppy and dam will allow us to study whether behaviours that the puppies are showing with their mum are also being shown with their human owner," she says.

"This doesn't necessarily translate from human mother-baby behaviours - we have litters of puppies, not litters of babies.

"Through better understanding of the [attachment](#) between humans and dogs we can nurture and protect this [relationship](#), and maximise the benefits to both humans and dogs."

Provided by University of Adelaide

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