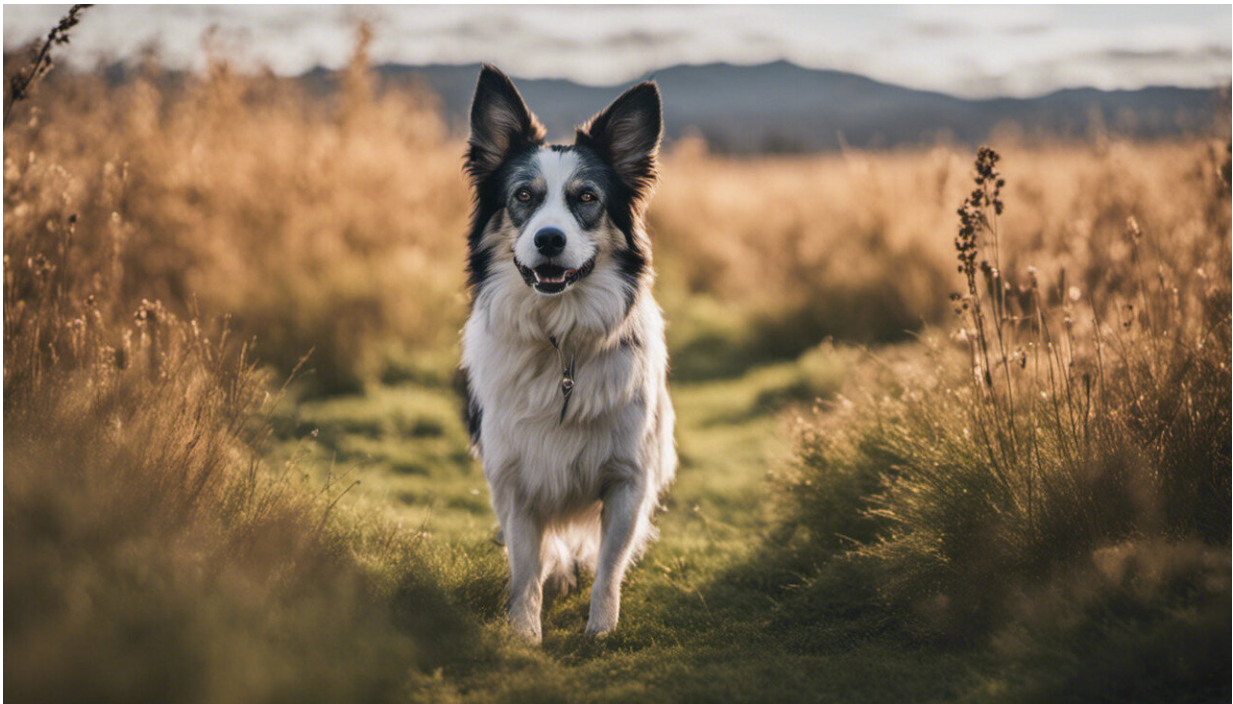


# An expert's top five reasons why dogs can be considered exceptional animals

August 25 2023, by Melissa Starling

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Dogs are important to a lot of humans, but what makes them so?

Apart from being warm, soft and capable of inspiring our unconditional love, there are a number of unique characteristics that set [dogs](#) apart from other animals.

As a dog researcher, animal behavior consultant and canophile (which means I *love* dogs), let me share five traits that I think make dogs so special.

## **Dogs are hypersocial**

We all know those golden retriever-type dogs that appear absurdly delighted to meet any new social being. It's hard not to be taken in by their infectious friendliness. These furry, hypersocial creatures have some key genetic differences even to other domestic dogs.

Most fascinatingly, these [genetic differences](#) are in the area of the genome [associated](#) with hypersociability in people with a genetic condition called Williams-Beuren syndrome. Although people with this syndrome experience negative health effects, they also tend to be very open, engaging and sociable.

Not all dogs fall into this hypersocial category—but even those that don't are unusually accepting of unfamiliar people and dogs.

Unlike other social wild canids such as wolves, domestic dogs can quite happily live in harmony with different species, as well as individuals of their own species that aren't from their family. This is what makes it so easy to slot dogs into our lives.

## **Dogs are wired to understand us**

Humans have selectively bred dogs for many generations. And in many cases, we've bred them to take direction to help us in a wide variety of jobs—including being companions to us. This has led to domestic dogs being born with an interest in humans.

From an early age, [puppies are attracted](#) to human faces. While dogs are as cooperative as wolves, they tend to be submissive toward humans and follow our directions—whereas wolves are bolder and more likely to lead when [co-operating with humans](#).

Dogs also learn to follow our gaze, and show a left-gaze bias when looking at human faces. This means they spend more time looking at the left side of our faces (which would be the right side from our perspective). This bias emerges in several species when they are processing [emotional information](#), which shows that dogs are [reading our faces](#) to figure out how we're feeling.

For a while it was also thought dogs were particularly attentive to human gestures such as pointing—but recent research suggests many domestic species and some wild animal species can also [follow pointing](#).

## **Dogs come in countless shapes and sizes**

No other species comes in such a huge variety of shapes and sizes as [domestic dogs](#). Not even cats or horses display the same diversity.

The largest dogs may be close to 25 times the size of the smallest! Beyond that, we have dogs with drop ears and prick ears and everything in between, tails and no tails, or bob tails, short legs and long legs, long noses and short noses—and a huge variety of coat colors, lengths and textures.

For dogs, this huge variation might mean they have more to learn than other animals when it comes to understanding their own kind. For example, owners of herding breed dogs may find their dog a bit confused, or even defensive, when meeting a very different short-faced breed such as a bulldog.

For us, it means we should appreciate how the size and shape of dogs can influence [their behavior](#) and experiences. For instance, dogs with longer noses have sharper vision, while dogs with a lighter build tend to be more energetic and fearful.

## **Dogs form deep emotional bonds**

Domestic dogs have been shown to form attachment bonds with human caregivers that are very similar to those formed between [children and parents](#).

This may partly explain why they can read our [emotional signals](#), why they become distressed (and try to help us) when [we are distressed](#), and why MRI studies show dogs are happy when they smell [their owners](#).

It may also be why they panic when separated from us. Dogs' attachment to humans goes beyond being hypersocial. To them, we are a lot more than the food we provide and the balls we throw. We are an attachment figure akin to a parent.

## **Dogs can help us be our best selves**

Most dog owners would agree their dog brings out the best in them. They can confide in their dog and love them unconditionally—sometimes more easily than they can another human.

Dogs are playing important roles in animal-assisted therapy, where their nonjudgmental presence can be a calming influence and [facilitate social interactions](#). They can even help children [learn to read](#) and [alleviate anxiety](#).

Although assisting humans with their [emotional problems](#) can be a

difficult task for such an emotionally sensitive species, research suggests the right dogs can rise to the task if their workload is [managed carefully](#).

Horses are also used in [animal-assisted therapy](#), as are some smaller furry animals. However, dogs are more portable and can remain at ease in stimulating environments such as courtrooms, schools and airports. They are uniquely placed to accompany us wherever we go.

## Paws for thought

We might like to think dogs are special for some of the traits we value in humans, such as intelligence, selflessness or a loving nature. But really dogs are exceptional for simply being dogs.

They are social acrobats that can find social harmony wherever they go. They have rich emotional lives in which they co-exist with different species and can even forge bonds [outside of their own species](#).

They are also generally tolerant of our primate ways—and good at receiving our love. And for me that's enough.

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