

Study: Cats Bond With Humans as Much or More Than Dogs

As humans spend more time with other animals learning about their intelligence and emotional states, many long-held beliefs fall regularly by the wayside as we find crows using tools, elephants visiting their dead relatives' graves, and octopuses playing with toys.

One assumption regularly popping up on TV and social media feeds is the claim that cats tolerate humans but don't really care about us except as a food bringer – and they certainly don't bond with us. Or if they do, it's nothing on the level of how “man's best friend” the dog bonds with us.



By Mark Robison

New research from the Human-Animal Interaction Lab at Oregon State University looked into this and confirmed what many cat lovers – among which I include myself – already knew: Cats develop strong bonds with humans. But what was surprising about the study was just how much more prevalent those bonds are. Researchers found that cats may bond with humans more than dogs and about as much as infants do. The study was published in [last month's issue](#) of the scientific journal Current Biology.

Researchers used something called a “secure base test,” an experiment that's been long-used to measure bonds that dogs, primates and even infants form with caretakers. Cat and kitten owners would bring their pets to a laboratory room where the cats had never been. The owner and the cat would sit in the room together for two minutes. Then the owner would leave so the cat would be alone, creating a mild stressor for the cat. And finally the owner would return after two minutes.

What happens next in the room is what the researchers are really interested in: how the cat reacts to the return of his or her person.

Sixty-five percent greeted their people and then went about exploring the room, occasionally returning to their person. To the researchers, this signified a cat who is securely attached to their person, viewing them as a safe base in an unfamiliar environment.

“This may be an adaptation of the bond they would have with their parents when they were young,” the study's lead author, Krysten Vitale, [told the New York Times](#). She added that this behavior may mean: “Everything's OK. My owner's back, I feel comforted and reassured, and now I can go back to exploring.”

About 35 percent of the cats avoided their owners or clung to them when they returned. This indicates to researchers that they do not see their owners as a source of security and stress relief.

When the same test is done with infants, about 65 percent display secure attachment to their caretakers – the same as cats. As for dogs, about 58 percent view their person as a source of security.



“I think there’s this idea that cats don’t really depend on their owner and need them,” Vitale [told Popular Science magazine](#). “But at least in this test, what we’re seeing is that most cats use their owner for their sense of security.”

In other words, cats depend on us a lot more than common wisdom would have us believe. This brings to mind the many great cats living at area shelters right now. Adoption could literally be a lifesaver for them – and they would finally have a home that’s their secure base.

Mark Robison is Senior Consultant at Humane Network. He was an award-winning senior editor at the Reno Gazette-Journal daily newspaper for many years, and he has been President of CockadoodleMoo Farm Animal Sanctuary since 2007.

