

How to Cope When Your Pet Plays Favorites

By Andrea Vardaro Tucker, ELS

Who hasn't either been or bemoaned a favorite child or teacher's pet? But what happens when your pet—who you turn to for unconditional love—has a favorite human?

Favoritism can be difficult for children and adults—especially those who suffer from mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. It's pretty common, though, for pets to play favorites.

Mikkel Becker, lead trainer for Fear Free Happy Homes, says that about 1 in 4 dogs she sees has a “favorite person.” In her experience, cats are even more likely to bond strongly with just one person. And after living through the COVID-19 pandemic, it's only natural that household dynamics might have shifted, with some family members home with pets more than others.

According to Mikkel, though, up to 1 in 20 dogs has such a strong preference for a single person that the dog shows aggression or other undesirable behaviors toward others. This is when favoritism can become problematic.

Normal or Not?

“Unless it is extreme, I don't think favoritism is something we need to prevent or treat. It's pretty natural to have different relationships with different individuals based on interests and personality,” says Dr. Liz Stelow, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist with the Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital at UC Davis in California.

When a pet fears one or more people or prefers a certain person to the extent that she doesn't let other members of the household handle her, Dr. Stelow cautions, then it's time to contact your vet for diagnosis and treatment.



The same goes if your pet has become overly attached to another pet in your household, which is especially common in canine siblings from the same litter. (On the other hand, cats who are raised together can make excellent housemates and tend to experience less conflict than unrelated cats.) Mikkel adds, “While bonded pets can have great benefits, it can also be traumatic if the animals are separated [because of] something like vet care, illness, injury, or death.”

Contact your vet if you're concerned about your pets' attachment to one another or suspect an underlying cause like past trauma, poor socialization, or anxiety, which Dr. Stelow says can result in extreme bonding with other pets over humans.

Getting to know what pets' behavior and body language mean can help you

determine if your pet's attachment to another person or pet is potentially problematic (see the sidebar on page 6). The following are just some possible signs of fear in both cats and dogs:

- Refusal to approach
- Attempted escape
- Aversion of eyes or head
- Aggression
- Fidgeting (including yawning, licking lips, and lifting paws, as well as changes in head, ear, or tail position, when a person or pet approaches)

Dr. Stelow describes anxiety as “more of a long-lasting state than a fear event and can be seen as difficulty fully relaxing either in a particular situation or all the time, nervousness or hypervigilance, overreacting to everyday stimuli, or stress behaviors like self-licking or chewing.”

Any behavior problem or change in behavior can be a sign of pain, illness,

Sharomka/Shutterstock

bbernarof/Shutterstock

or injury, so see your veterinarian to rule out health concerns. A behavioral specialist or animal trainer can also help improve pets' favoritism behaviors; ask your vet for recommendations.

Socialization and Exposure

Pet parents can help all family members live more harmoniously with their pet by helping to prevent extreme favoritism and expanding their pet's preferences, depending on what stage of life the pet is in and who the pet might typically encounter.

Prime socialization occurs between 3 to 8 weeks of age for kittens and 6 to 16 weeks for puppies, according to Dr. Stelow. "These are the weeks that a young animal is most open to becoming comfortable around new stimuli," she explains. "After that, it's not 'socialization' but 'exposure.'"

Keep interactions with others positive. "[More exposure] can lead to sensitization and greater anxiety," says Dr. Stelow. "Any exposure should be at the discretion of the puppy or kitten; if the animal says 'no' to an exposure, this should be honored. In short, you cannot force acceptance."

Adopted older pets might come from environments and experiences that make them predisposed to being fearful or defensive. "Older pets can be exposed to new things, but, depending on personality, they may not be as open to accepting them. Watch for the animal's response to something new, and reward a calm or curious response to it," Dr. Stelow says. "It's always the pet's choice."

Earn your pet's trust by caring for her but also respecting her need for privacy. A veterinary behaviorist might be especially helpful with pets who are older when adopted. Ask your veterinarian for advice and referral to a behaviorist, if warranted.

Ideally, all pets should interact with people of all ages, races, genders—you name it. Positive interactions with a diverse range of people as well as other animals and experiences lead to well-socialized pets who make for better neighbors and friends.

Children and Pets

Children can create a particular challenge because they're unpredictable, but even if you don't have or intend to have children, consider introducing your pet to them. Most pets will encounter children at some point, and getting your pet used to them can be crucial to making sure these encounters go smoothly.

Safe and healthy relationships between human children and pets require some prep work:

- **Ready your pet for the arrival of a new baby or child.** When bringing home baby—or even preparing to adopt an older child—be sure to socialize your pet with other children, and set up a safe space your pet can retreat to for some alone time.
- **Encourage your human and animal**

children to grow together. Pets can be OK with baby behaviors but intimidated by more aggressive toddlers, so be sure to expose your pet to this population. Also, as kids age, give them age-appropriate pet care responsibilities to earn your pet's trust and devotion.

- **Train children for safe interactions with pets.** Children's unintentional aggression can push pets away or cause a fearful response. Ask your veterinarian for advice on helping pets and kids get along.
- **Set up positive interactions with kids of all ages.** That way, your pet should respond well to children she sees on walks or when friends or family members with children visit.
- **Observe all interactions.** "Bites happen usually when no one is watching," Dr. Stelow says.
- **Don't force it.** If your pet is uncomfortable around children (even your own), allow her to stay away. Remind your children to give your pet space, and ask your veterinarian for additional suggestions. In this case, a referral to a veterinary behaviorist may also be needed.



Trust and Independence

With any pet, prevent overdependence on just one person by keeping care and routines consistent but mixing up who's involved. For example, have different members of the household feed your pet her meals or healthy treats. If you have multiple pets, spend one-on-one time with each pet, away from the other, to help strengthen your relationship and encourage their independence from each other. Ask other family members to do the same.

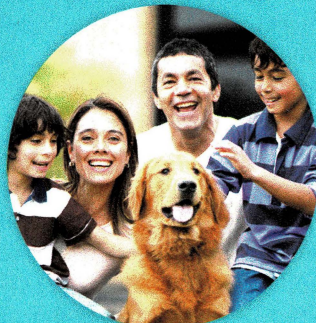
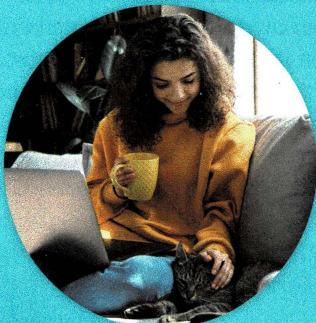
“Trust is best earned with kindness, patience, and consistency,” Dr. Stelow says. If these are not enough, talk with your veterinarian about having your pet assessed for anxiety or other potential underlying concerns.

Board-certified editor in the life sciences and HealthyPet copy editor Andrea Vardaro Tucker feels fortunate that her family's Westie, Cole, loves everyone she meets pretty equally—even if she just met them.

Determining Whether Your Pet Is an Introvert or Extrovert

Introverted pets are more likely to prefer one-on-one interactions with a special human, while extroverted pets might crave more socializing.

No need to plug your pet's traits into an online Myers-Briggs-type quiz to figure out whether she's an introvert or extrovert. Look for the signs listed in the table, and tailor your approach to broadening your pet's social horizon to her unique comfort level.



INTROVERT	EXTROVERT
Sticks to one favorite person	Craves social interaction with multiple people
Suspicious/fearful of or reserved with new people or pets	Considers everyone a potential friend
Most comfortable around a few select people	Warms up quickly to most people or pets
Might have closed, fearful body language*	Shows open, happy body language*

- *Dr. Stelow recommends learning more about canine and feline body language:
- **Dogs:** [aspcapro.org/canine-communication-webinar-series](https://www.aspcapro.org/canine-communication-webinar-series) (select one of the free webinars, and then click the play button to get started)
 - **Cats:** [maddiesfund.org/feline-communication-how-to-speak-cat.htm](https://www.maddiesfund.org/feline-communication-how-to-speak-cat.htm) (after registering, you can view the free content)