

Are Dogs Really Unconditional?

by Risë VanFleet, PhD, RPT-S, CDBC



ARE DOGS UNCONDITIONAL? Very often I've seen the comment made that they are. It often *seems* that they are. Quite a few years ago when I was attending a training program for dog trainers, the instructor made an interesting comment about this, stating that dogs are not unconditional -- that they **DO** have conditions. This caused me to rethink this idea at the time, and here's what I came up with...

Dogs do have conditions. If people are doing something that they don't like, they will show stress signals or even move away if they can. If people (or even other dogs) regularly do things they dislike, they will avoid that individual. Being social beings who have co-evolved with people, though, they often will try to "make things better" with a person who is creating anxiety in them. This is where you might see some of the appeasement behaviors - the "grins" with the commissures (corner of mouth) pulled way back, the fast or excessive licking, the lowering of body and fast tail wags as they try to say, "I mean no harm." But if the human doesn't get it and continues to invade space or worse, the dog might find ways to avoid that situation or the person. These all seem to be conditions to me. Dogs seem to love us and seek our company and approval *a lot*, but if we go too far over the line (and that line is different for different dogs) and cause them to feel stressed, they usually don't continue interacting with us in the same way. They get "defensive" just as we would. It's part of survival. Of course, there are some dogs who seem to put up with

everything, just as there are humans who do the same, but I'm not sure I would consider that to be healthy behavior if they are being significantly stressed or abused.



This was Murrie the first time he saw one of us pick up a fly swatter. Since then he has always shown stress signals, such as this nose lick, when the fly swatter is in human hands. It is rare for him to react to people this way, but this suggests that he has some sort of negative association with fly swatters. It could be the snapping sound they make or it could be that in his prior life he had a bad experience with one. The key here is that he is communicating his stress and will walk away and avoid anyone holding a fly swatter. That a “condition” he puts on interactions with people.

What I think dogs **do** offer us are two things that are close to being unconditional but not quite the same. They offer us **tolerance** and **acceptance**. They seem to put up with a lot, and it's quite remarkable that they don't bite and defend themselves more often than they do. YouTube is full of videos of people encroaching on dogs' space, being unkind to them, or even children jumping up and down on them--making the dogs very uncomfortable, yet they put up with it much of the time. They are, by their social nature and their coevolution with us, conflict-avoidant. They tolerate many unpleasant things in order to get along. And no, they are NOT trying to dominate us and take over the world!! The science makes all of this pretty clear.



Kirrie is merely tolerating this item put on her head. I put it on her for just 15 seconds to get this photo of "tolerance." Because she dislikes dress-up in general, I don't dress her up in her play therapy work or any other time. You can see on her face that this is not something enjoyable for her, yet she is putting up with it. Unfortunately, far too often people do things that their dogs merely tolerate, yet they are unaware of their dogs' reactions. (Kirrie was paid handsomely after this was taken with some tasty treats.)

Dogs also are very accepting, and I think this is what people usually mean when they refer to dogs as "unconditional." They don't care what we look like or sound like. They don't care if we have wrinkles, are overweight, or simply did not have the good fortune to be born with that perfect face and body. They want to be with us with no concern whatsoever about the things we humans seem to spend so much time worrying about. That is refreshing and perhaps one reason we love being with them. We don't have to worry about being judged because they seem to value us for who we are. They might not like some of our behavior and will avoid us when that occurs, but they generally are very accepting of our basic selves.

Perhaps I am making too much of the semantics, but it seems to me that this distinction is important. Dogs DO react to our behaviors, and even though they tolerate a lot and want to be with us does not mean they are "okay" with everything we do. They are communicating with us all the time, and if we take some time to learn to read their body language and to pay attention to what they are saying, it can enhance the relationship if we then respond and alter what we are doing so they are as comfortable and happy with us as is possible. That, to me, is the type of mutual relationship I want to have with my dogs, and any other animals I am privileged to meet and be with. This is also the type of relationship I want to help my clients in AAPT have with my animal therapy partners, and eventually with other animals and humans in their lives.



Dogs like to hang out with us and do things with us no matter what we look like. They are eager to be with us as long as we treat them kindly. If we can avoid behaviors of our own that stress them, it enhances their trust in us and helps build some pretty amazing relationships.



Participants in the June 2017 Level 2 Animal Assisted Play Therapy™ 4-day workshop in Northumberland, UK.

Author: **Risë VanFleet, PhD, RPT-S, CDBC** (licensed psychologist, registered play therapist/supervisor, certified dog behavior consultant)

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