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Building Relationships with Dogs ...The Squirrely Way

by Risë VanFleet, PhD, RPT-S, CDBC

Many of us have seen the squirrel scenes from the movie *UP!* [If you haven't, just do a search for "squirrel scenes from UP" on YouTube]. Those scenes of dogs immediately riveting their attention when one of them shouts "squirrel!" are funny because they are so realistic. (The cover photo for this is Kirrie's "squirrel look.") As is often the case in autumn at our house, squirrels are actively gathering nuts on our property and that of our adjoining neighbors, so we

often have many “SQUIRREL!” moments as the dogs look out the windows. Fortunately, I’ve worked with my dogs to have great recalls, so even if they head off on a squirrel chase when we’re outdoors, I can call them back.

So what do squirrels have to do with building relationship? Not very much, really, but today I tried something that worked so well I wanted to share it. It also illustrates my firm belief that relationships with our companion animals are best when built on a two-way street.

I am willing to do a lot of things for my dogs, but I don’t think dressing up as a squirrel is one of them. The idea below is much more practical than that.



You'll be relieved to know that this idea does not involve dressing up like a squirrel. [photo from Amazon]

Quite a few years ago, I learned a simple relationship-building game during a workshop with Suzanne Clothier. In this, you drop a treat surreptitiously on the ground and then excitedly call your dog over and point it out. As the dog is consuming that treat, you drop another when the dog isn’t looking, and then point that one out with great enthusiasm as well. You do this with several treats, and soon the dog is paying close attention to you as you continue to play the game. It’s one way to have some fun and build a dog’s attention to you and your point.



These therapists and educators are using the relationship-building game discussed above during an Animal Assisted Play Therapy (TM) training workshop in the UK. You can also stand up and move around while playing this game.

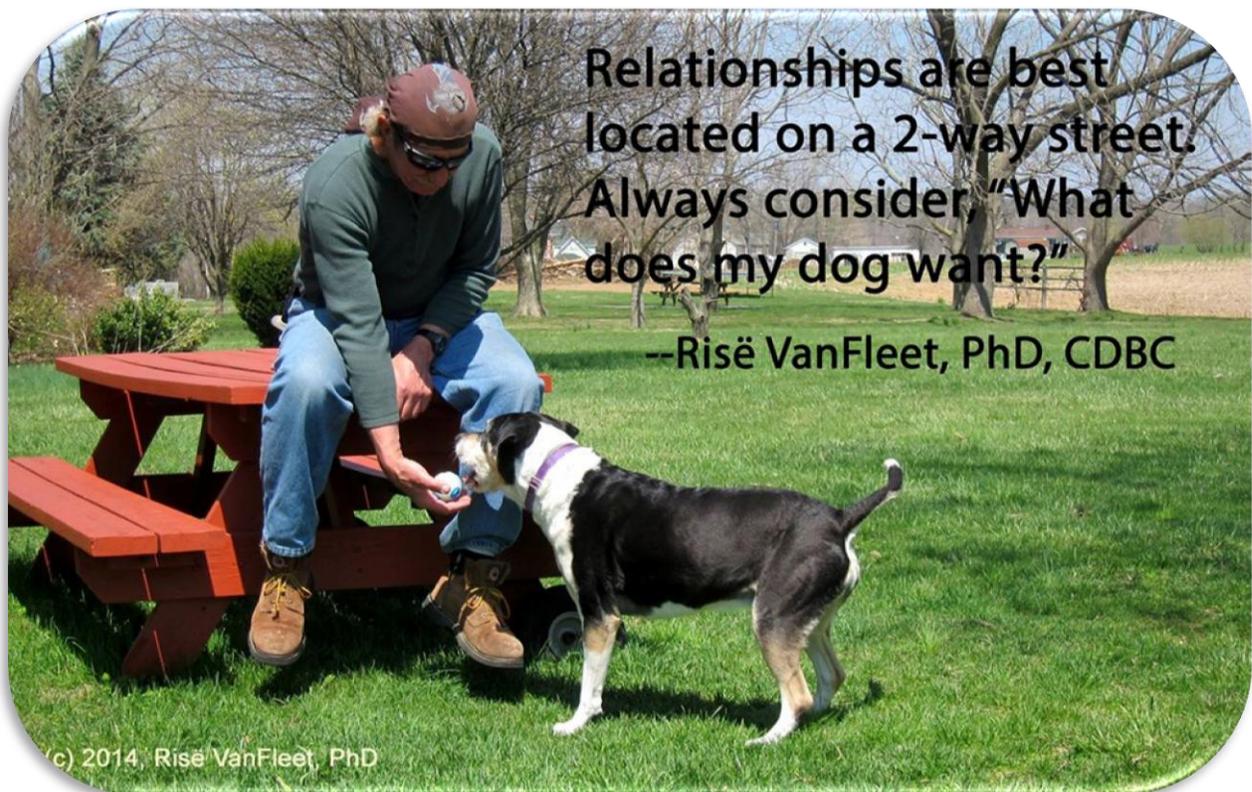
Despite always having a terrific recall, Kirrie has begun wandering a bit more in her older years. Her arthritis prevents her playing ball as she used to, so I am happy that she is still out there exploring the world with interest. Even so, I do need her to come back when I call her. Today when I called her, she stopped, looked at me briefly, and then bounded off in the other direction among some trees. I noticed she was following a scent, occasionally lifting her head into the wind and at other times keeping her nose on the ground. She was having fun and bouncing around as she had done when younger. That gave me an idea. What if I used that relationship-building game, but instead of pointing out treats, I pointed out scents?

I've watched the squirrels scurrying across the back of our property, and I know which trees they use. I called Kirrie over to a nearby tree, and immediately and excitedly pointed out the places I knew the squirrels had been earlier today. She immediately began following that scent around the tree. I pointed out a few spots on the trunk where the squirrels had been, and she jumped up on the tree to explore those odors further, too. We shared those few moments of "squirrelling" and as I showed her where the squirrels had been, I felt her immediately reconnect with me. After this, she eagerly came back to the house with me.

This is a simple example of something I try to do with all my animals. I want our relationships to be mutually enjoyable, and that means I have to pay attention to what they are interested in some of the time, rather than focusing only on what I might want them to do. Today, as I watched Kirrie disregard my call in order to sniff more of the natural smells in her environment, I thought about what she was getting out of it. Then the idea occurred to me that maybe I could give her a "squirrel!" moment without actually interacting with or chasing a

squirrel. After we had our “squirrely” reconnection, I took her in the house for a little chase play with toys.

This whole scenario only took about 3 minutes, but it illustrates how we can pay attention to what interests and excites our animals, and how we can give them opportunities to explore their worlds on their own terms sometimes. This is just one way we can participate in that process. Another way is to follow them around, encourage them to explore, and simply observe them as they do so. These ways of showing interest in their activities help us learn more about our animal companions and how they experience the world. ...And the best part is that it helps us reconnect with them in simple yet meaningful ways!



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

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