

# ATTACHMENT SCALES AS A TOOL FOR BEHAVIOR CONSULTANTS

by **Melissa McMath Hatfield**

Human-dog interactions have many of the same components of human-human interactions: They amount to a relationship based on trust with mutual physical, psychological, and social benefits. The history-taking part of a consultation isn't just about finding out what the antecedents and consequences of a specific challenging behavior might be, it's also your chance to find out about how your clients feel about, and relate to, their dog. Before we begin any functional analysis, whether we realize it or not, our first assessment begins with the first phone call. We are asking ourselves: What kind of life is this dog living? What is his emotional and physical environment? What are his human relationships?

There is a need, therefore, for consultants to understand more about how relationships work for both humans and dogs, and about how different kinds of relationships can be indicators of potential problems. To have the best chance of creating a solution that works, we need to understand something of the psychological theory of relationships and have a way to incorporate this understanding into our evidence-based approach.

Although a functional analysis is imperative, measuring the interaction and attachment between human and dog can be a natural starting point in the consultation. Evaluating a critical component in the life of the dog and his environment—the individuals who are his caretakers—can prove invaluable in developing a protocol. Before we discuss the individual scales and how they can assist the behavior consultant in evaluating the human-dog bond, we must first explore the psychological core of that bond—*attachment*.

## WHAT IS ATTACHMENT?

The psychologist [John Bowlby](#) is generally thought of as the father of attachment theory, which focuses on how relationships develop and contribute to psychological health. He defined attachment

as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings.” Bowlby believed that there are four distinguishing characteristics of attachment:

1. Proximity Maintenance: The desire to be near the people we are attached to.
2. Safe Haven: Returning to the caregiver for comfort and safety in the face of a fear or threat.
3. Secure Base: The caregiver acts as a base of security from which the child can explore the surrounding environment.
4. Separation Distress: Anxiety occurs in the absence of the caregiver.

Children bond to their caregivers in different ways, depending on how they are treated and on other factors. Attachment theory seeks to identify these different styles of attachment and understand how they contribute to a whole suite of psychological characteristics, including behavior problems and mental illness in children and adults. Bowlby made three key propositions about attachment theory:

1. Children who were raised confident that their primary caregiver will be available “are less likely to experience fear than those who are raised without such conviction.”
2. There is a critical period, starting in infancy and lasting through adolescence, where attachments are formed along with beliefs about the self and expectations about others. These beliefs and expectations remain relatively stable into adult life.
3. A person’s beliefs and expectations about themselves and others that are formed during this time are directly tied to the experience of attachment they have with their primary caregiver.

I am sure you have had four-legged clients who had a safe and reliable caretaker during their critical periods and those who did not? I believe the insights from Bowlby’s attachment theory can apply to adult dogs who are well-adjusted and those who are experiencing emotional distress.

Attachment is most commonly talked about between parents and children, but can extend to any relationship. József Topál and others hypothesize that the human-dog bond is similar to that of a parent and child, and studies have repeatedly demonstrated that dogs behave strikingly similarly to children in some tests of attachment. Dogs tend to enjoy being close to their owners and seek comfort from them when stressed or anxious; they return to them as a secure base in a new environment; and many can suffer significant separation distress. Some key behaviors in evaluating the dog’s attachment and caregiving patterns are:

- Proximity-seeking
- Separation and reunion behavior
- Comfort seeking

- Expressed attachment behaviors

These are worth noting early in the information-gathering and evaluation phase. Is the dog-human attachment appropriate and without conflict or distress?

Psychologists have identified different styles of attachment that infants develop in response to how they are treated. Secure attachment is thought of as the least likely to cause distress or anxiety, but there are different kinds of insecure attachment that are understood to be more dangerous to the psychological health of the child. A great many textbooks and papers exist on this topic in human psychology, but it is only recently drawing the attention of animal cognition researchers.

## **ATTACHMENT IN DOGS**

Theresa Rehn and Linda J. Keeling in their article, [“Measuring dog-owner relationships: Crossing boundaries between animal behavior and human psychology,”](#) write that the dog’s attachment style and the owner’s caregiving strategy should be “incorporated when assessing the relationship.” They report that, over time, the attachment style of the dog grows to be dependent on the caregiver’s strategy. Dogs learn their caregivers’ response and adapt their behavior accordingly. According to Rehn and Keeling, dogs can adjust to many different types of caregiver strategies, so it is important to focus on all the members of the dog’s family when measuring attachment, looking at how it may be affecting the dog’s behavior, and making decisions about the best behavioral interventions to propose. Because attachment styles are dependent upon the dog’s genetics and experiences, and the owner’s caregiving strategies, each dyadic relationship will be unique.

Rehn and Keeling also suggest that measuring attachment could also be used as part of the matchmaking process for potential adopters from shelters and rescues. Knowing how a family sees the role of a family dog and what kinds of time and resources they are willing to commit could help adoption counselors choose dogs that would thrive with that level of attention, training, and living environment. More research would be needed to establish whether this would improve return rates.

Understanding that different family members might have different attachment styles could help a consultant understand those situations where the dog is well-behaved around some family members, but challenging and difficult to manage around others.

Challenging behavior is not only potentially caused by unhealthy attachment behaviors; problems with attachment can also be caused by issues with behavior. A study showed that the attachment adult human family members felt towards their dog tended to be stronger when the owner reported that their dog was well-behaved.

## **WHY SHOULD WE MEASURE ATTACHMENT?**

Many people rely on intuition to get a sense of how the family relates to their dog, but our subjective judgement can be unreliable. Encountering clients from different cultures, demographics, and lifestyles can lead us to misjudge how they feel about their dog, because those feelings are expressed in a way we're not used to.

In this particular way, behavior consultants are like human psychologists, who treat people from a wide variety of backgrounds and have to be able to suspend personal judgements in favor of clinical information. Psychologists have developed ways to compensate for their potential biases; for example, they use questionnaires and tests that have been designed to be scored against objective criteria, like attachment scales.

## **HOW CAN WE MEASURE ATTACHMENT?**

Depending on the scale of choice, assessment scales can measure attitudes, expectations, and perceptions of living with a dog. Knowing these helps you understand the dog's emotional and physical environment. Most attachment scales are short and require the family only to circle answers that feel right to them; they do not need a great deal of commitment, comprehension, or interaction. Many can be administered remotely before or after an in-home consult or pre-adoption visit at a shelter.

The start of the consultation process is the most natural time to administer an attachment scale: If you're already giving a family some forms to fill out to help you understand the dog's behavioral issues, adding a short attachment scale into the package is easy. Assessing attachment using a scale could also be useful for behavior consultants during the behavior modification process and afterwards, to get a sense of whether the improvements in behavior have been beneficial in the human-dog relationship?

Many of these scales are gathered in one place, a book called *Assessing the Human-Animal Bond: A Compendium of Actual Measures* by David Anderson. The compendium is a nearly exhaustive list of all the currently available statistically validated scales and metrics a consultant can use to measure the human-companion animal bond.

Specifically, what these tools are looking at is categories of attachment—whether the attachment is healthy or unhealthy, strong or weak, and what style it can be classified as. Assessment scales just bring these to light in the form of both subjective and objective data. They can be general, or apply specifically to different problems and scenarios a consultant might encounter. In addition to attachment scales, the *Compendium* also has an index and annotated bibliography of 71 related human-dog relationship measures including:

- Tools to measure the degree of empathy and bonding between a human and their companion animal
- Compatibility and personality rating scales
- Indicators of predisposition toward and beliefs about cruelty to animals
- Scales to classify and measure grief over the loss of a pet
- Questionnaires for people who are relinquishing or considering relinquishing a companion animal
- Specific scales to measure children’s experiences of, attitudes towards, and treatment of their pets

## **“WHAT DO I DO NOW?” SCENARIOS**

Here are three common scenarios that have specific scales for measuring the human-animal bond in a practically useful way:

### **SHELTER: ADOPTERS’ ATTITUDE**

You have been called to the local shelter to evaluate a dog for a potential adoption. You realize that an assessment scale to learn about the potential adopters’ attitude toward dog ownership would be a good place to start. Some assessment scale choices are:

- Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (LAPS)
- Coleman Dog Attitude (C-DAS)

- Pet Attitude Scale (PAS)

### **PRIVATE IN-HOME CONSULT: COUPLE'S PERCEPTION**

You have been called to do a private consult in the home for a dog that has had several unexplained aggressive outburst. Before you begin a function analysis, you do a quick analysis of the dog's overall living conditions. What is the emotional and physical environment? What is the relationship, if any with his owners? What are their perceptions of owning a dog, especially one that needs help? Are both owners in agreement on how to proceed? If not, why? If there is conflict, can you help them identify and resolve it so they comply with your treatment plan? By offering an assessment scale you are giving them a tool to help them identify problem areas. Some assessment scales available are:

- Human-Pet Relationship Measure
- CHENSHARE Pet Attachment Survey
- Companion Animal Bonding Scale (CABC)

### **IN-OFFICE CONSULT: FAMILY'S EXPECTATION**

The Brady Bunch arrives in your office with nine-month-old Fido, a rescue who has been in the home for six weeks. The three children range from 5 to 12 years of age, all boys. Fido has a timid personality, and lacks self-confidence and the socialization appropriate for his age. It becomes apparent that the parents have expectations of this puppy that probably he is not capable of fulfilling. Both the parents and the puppy are showing signs of stress. By offering an assessment scale you are helping them gain insight and redefine their expectations. Assessment scale options are:

- Children's Treatment of Animals questionnaire (CTAQ)
- Pet Expectation Inventory
- Children's Attitudes and Behavior toward Animals (CABTA)

These scales are most commonly used as part of a pre-consult questionnaire, but they can also be useful for your personal record-keeping too; attachment scales are a data set that you can look over to see if there are any correlations with how cases turn out: Do families who report lower attachment tend to do better with one kind of management style over another? Do you have trouble communicating with clients who are strongly emotionally attached to their dog?

## CONCLUSION

Attachment, bonding, empathy, and attitudes toward dog ownership can be measured and used as a practical tool in assessing the human-dog relationship. They can be used with other kinds of classification tools, for example, they can give a sense of which of the Humane Society of the United States' Four Levels of dog ownership the family is within. They offer you, as a canine behavior consultant, the ability to aid your client, their family, fosters, or potential adopters in identifying existing problems and for predicting potential conflict. They also aid in assessing the dog's quality of life, and in developing a protocol.

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