

By Jake Buvala
3LostDogs.com



HOW DO I GET MY DOG TO LOVE ME?

More tips for bonding with a dog

The following tale is adapted from a 3 Lost Dogs newsletter I sent out in June 2019. It's about what happened when I met my wife's dog, Bear, for the first time. How did this dog and I go from being total strangers to best friends in the space of about a month? Read on to find out.

Jake



MEET BEAR

I recently returned to the US after spending some time in Australia. I've been readjusting to things like driving on the right side of the road and tipping at restaurants.

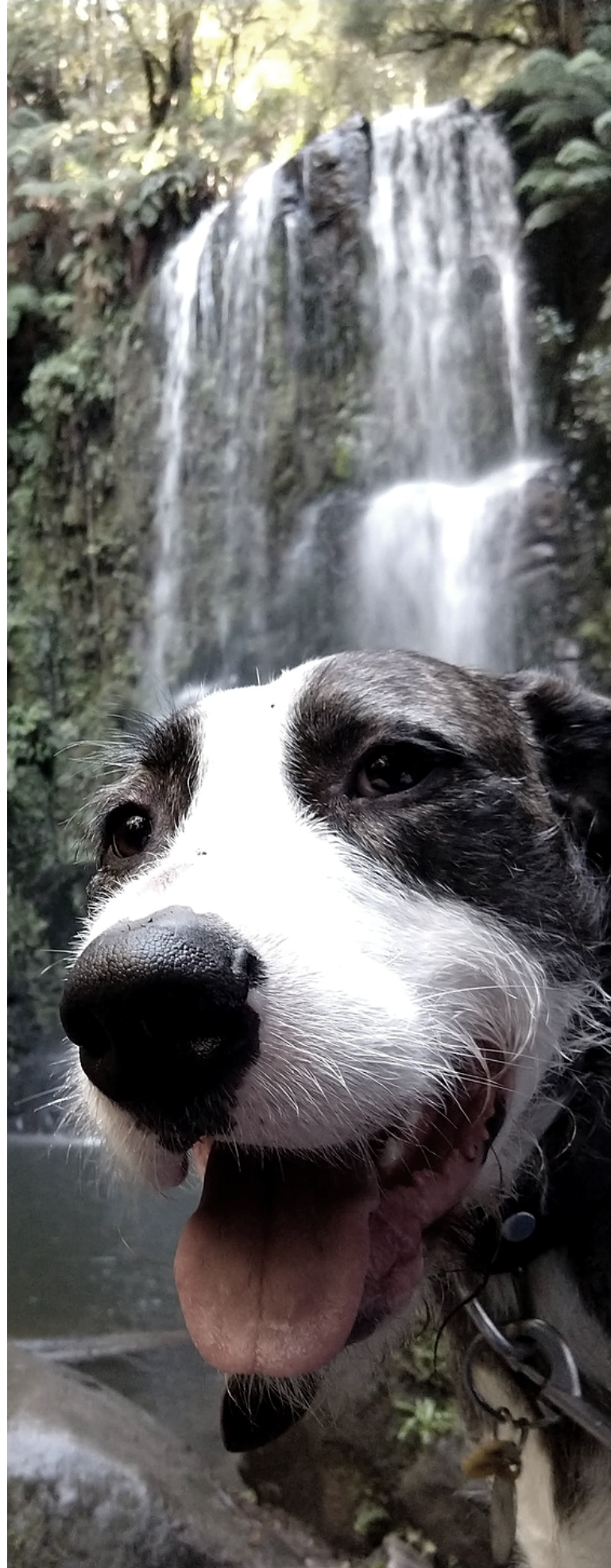
Why was I in Australia? I was visiting my other dog, Bear, who lives in Melbourne.

Okay - it wasn't JUST for Bear. I was also there to marry his human! But mostly for Bear. I mean, LOOK at that dog.

43 kilos (that's 95 lbs) of cuddly muscle.

A former pig dog who was abandoned because he preferred playing with people over hunting pigs, he ended up in a shelter, where my wife, Erin, found him.

And then he ate an entire couch. But that's a story for another day. Suffice it to say, Erin and Bear had a rough adjustment period.



I've known Bear from a distance for a long time, but this trip was the first time I got to meet him in person. I loved him already, but to him, I was a stranger suddenly living in his house and stealing a lot of his mom's attention.

Bear's feelings about strangers are... nuanced. He's friendly, but careful. Erin describes him best:

"Bear is superficially very happy to see new people and accept love. But looking at him a little longer, you can tell that it's a sort of desperate, fear-infused happiness. He wants people to love him because if they love him, they probably won't hurt him."

"How do I get my new dog to love me?"

I have this article that you may have seen:

14 Ways to Get Your New Dog to Trust, Love, and Respect You

It does well in the Google rankings, so one of the top searches people use to find 3 Lost Dogs is "how to get your dog to love you."

Ah yes, that *is* the question.

Many a dog expert has waxed poetic on the great Dog-Human Relationship question. It can indeed be an intangible and philosophical subject, and if you want to go in that direction, a good book is Suzanne Clothier's classic *Bones Would Rain From the Sky: Deepening Our Relationships with Dogs*. Damn it, SUCH pretty words that make me cry every time.



But, I mean, there are also practical things you can do.

Basically:

Be patient and respectful, and do lots of fun things together.

I get this a lot: “Animals love you, you must have a natural gift!” Aw shucks, but I don’t have a natural gift, I’ve just learned a few key ingredients. One of which is: ask before you touch, and listen if they say no.

“Hi Mr. Cat/Dog, can I pet you? No? Cool. I’ll be over here, you can come to me when you’re ready.”

Does your dog want to be petted?

Sometimes, even a dog who loves you very much won't want to be petted. Like humans, some dogs enjoy their personal space from time to time. And -also like humans- many dogs don't really enjoy being touched by people they're not familiar with. My dog Merlin is kind of like that; he'll tolerate strangers petting him, but it's not his most favorite thing in the world.

Listening when a dog says "no, don't touch me please" will go a long way toward building their trust in you. It'll probably help you bond faster.

How do you know if a dog is uncomfortable with petting? Watch for these signs:

- Subtly stiffening up or freezing in place when you go to touch them
- Leaning away from you
- Turning their head away
- Looking at you with their face turned slightly away, enough that you can see the whites of their eyes
- Yawning (yawning is a stress signal in dogs)

Try this simple test:

Pet the dog for a few seconds, and then stop petting. What does the dog do? Does she walk away, lean away, or seem to ignore you? She's saying "thanks but no thanks." But if she leans toward you, nudges your hand, gets up in your face or tries to climb on you? She's saying "more petting!"

While getting acquainted with Bear in person, I didn't fawn over him nearly as much as I felt like. He probably would've let me; he was excited to meet me, too.

But beneath the surface of his bubbly enthusiasm, I could see him asking the question. It was in the look in his eyes as he studied me, and in the way he flinched whenever I moved too quickly:

"You're not going to hurt me, are you?"

I wasn't entitled to Bear's trust and affection. I had to earn it.

For the first few days, I made it as low-pressure for him as possible.

I kept my body language polite according to dog standards (approach from the side, no leaning over him, no doing that well-intentioned but vaguely menacing thing where people reach toward a dog while insisting "it's okay, I'm nice, see?!"), and let him initiate all petting sessions.

As the weeks went by, we did all his favorite things. Frisbee and tug of war, tricks for treats, and long walks, just the two of us while Erin was at work. I gradually assumed an authority role, doing things like reminding him to be nice to the cat when he got too rough.



How to walk your dog to build your bond

Don't worry about hurrying from point A to point B. Travel in a relaxed manner, letting the dog stop and sniff all the fascinating smells on your path. This is fun and fulfilling for a dog, and they'll learn to associate you with fun and fulfilling things. It's also a great way for a stressed-out newly-adopted dog to de-stress.

Bring a container of delicious soft treats (crunchy biscuits usually aren't exciting enough to keep a dog's attention on a walk). Notice any time the dog chooses to check in with you, and reward with praise and a treat.

A simple way to make walks more enriching and tiring-in-a-good-way for dogs:

Go to an area where it's safe to do so, like a park, field, or forest, and put 'em on a long-line (a training leash at least 6m/20ft long). The long-line gives them more freedom to run back and forth and sniff to their heart's content. It's a much more natural and relaxing way of moving for a dog, as opposed to being stuck on a short lead.

It also creates opportunities for connection. You might notice that your dog begins to choose to keep an eye on you, or check in with you on their own. My Belgian malinois, River, and I have a game: I stop moving. She looks up at me. I turn and run in the opposite direction. Chase me!

Bear learned that I was safe, fun, and the source of good things. He also learned to understand my heavy American accent. We were best buddies by the time I went home.

Erin reports that he only recently stopped searching the house for me.

(Pffft it's fine. I'm FINE. I'm not broken-hearted AT ALL)

My relationship with Bear remains a long-distance one - for now. Don't worry, Bear, I'll be back soon.

If you'd like more dog tips, advice, and stories, you can follow the adventures of my dogs (both the ones who live with me and the long-distance ones) on Instagram:

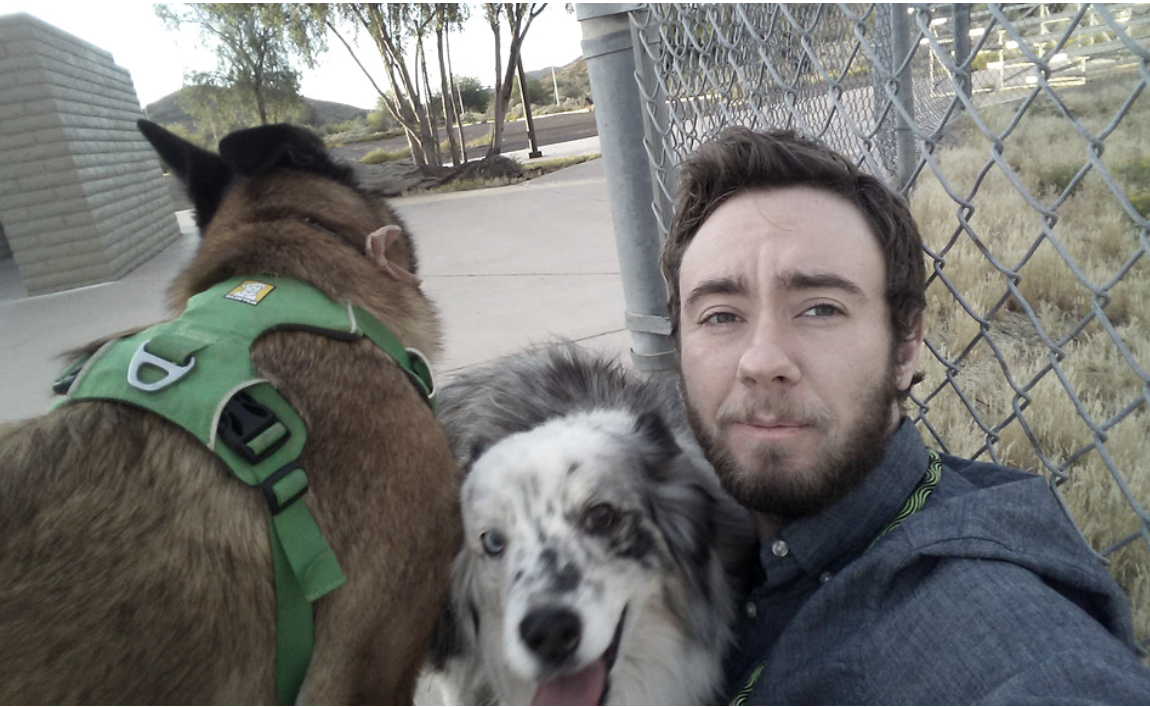


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hi! I'm Jake Buvala, a dog trainer and writer. I created 3LostDogs.com in 2009.

I got started in dog training as a teenager, competing in agility with my dogs. I have a total of eleven years experience volunteering in animal shelters: over the years, I held the titles of litter box scrubber, dog walker, dog trainer, people trainer, and adoption counselor. (I'm taking a break from shelter work. The burnout is real)

To continue my professional education, I attend seminars and conferences like Clicker Expo, and keep up with the current scientific understanding of dog behavior. Sifting through the endless sea of information so you don't have to.

I live in Arizona with my dogs Merlin the border collie, River the Belgian Malinois, and Hazel the lab/pit bull mix. (And sometimes I live in Melbourne with my dog Bear)