This is a transcript of The Conversation’s Curious Kids podcast ‘Why is my dog so cute?’, published on May 19 2024.

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Eloise: Hello everyone, and welcome back to The Conversation’s Curious Kids. Before we start this episode, I’d like to make a little request. Did any of you who live in the UK, Europe or the USA see the Northern Lights last Friday or Saturday? On the 10th or 11th of May? If so, I’d love to hear what you thought for a future episode! Please leave a voice recording describing what you saw and how you felt on our website at https://www.funkidslive.com/podcast/curiouskids/ Or ask a parent to record you on their phone and send the recording to curiouskids@theconversation.com. Thank! Now on with the episode.

Deborah: Can I meet your dog?

Grace: Here we go. This is my dog.

Eloie: Hi Max!

G: He's sniffing around and he's just like, hugging me and he's licking me and he's just like, so excited to see me. Sometimes if he's like, really excited, he can't wag his tail enough because he's so happy. It just makes him like, so cute.

Eloise: Like many of you, I’m sure, Grace finds her dog absolutely adorable.

But have you ever wondered why?

Grace: Why is my dog so cute?

D: That’s a great question!
Welcome to The Conversation’s Curious Kids, the podcast where a kid asks a great question and we find a very clever expert to answer it! So all you curious kids out there, if you have a burning question, please write to us at curiouskids@theconversation.com and we will do our best to answer it.

I’m Eloise and today I’m joined by two people who absolutely love animals.

Eloise: Hi Grace!

Grace: I'm 11 years old and I live with my pet dog, Max.

Deborah: Hi Grace, it's lovely to meet you.

Eloise: And Deborah Wells

Deborah: I am a reader in the School of Psychology in Queen's University in Belfast.

Eloise: So apart from him being so excited to see you, what else do you find cute about your dog, Grace?

Grace: He makes puppy eyes and his ears go down and he’s like whheee. He looks like he’s trying to persuade me for food and stuff but really he’s just trying to have a cuddle.

Deborah: I would agree with you, Grace. I think Max is very cute. And not just your dog, but most dogs, people consider to be cute, don't they? So why do you think it is that we find dogs in general cute?

Grace: Maybe because we raised them to be like that. Because mostly they get more attention if they are more cute. It's a bit like survival.

Deborah: Yeah, you're right. It does link back to survival and what we now know is that animals, and particularly young animals trigger something in us called the baby schema effect.
Eloise: The baby schema effect. This means that we humans instinctively react to young animals in the same way that we would react towards a human baby.

Deborah: And it seems that both young animals and human babies share similar characteristics that we’re automatically designed to find attractive. And you’ve said some of the features. The features include having a large forehead in relation to the rest of the body. And Max has got a really big head compared to his body. big wide eyes, a small nose, a small mouth, plump cheeks, and a chubby, cuddly body with quite short limbs. And I think some of those things probably describe your dog.

Eloise: As well as your little baby sibling.

Deborah: So these sorts of really cute features are designed to very, very quickly attract our attention and spark rapid brain activity.

And this then results in our body flooding us with happy hormones, things that put us into a really pleasurable state of mind. Specifically two hormones called dopamine and oxytocin.

Some research has even shown that if we look at a picture of a baby, and a picture of a puppy, our brains respond in exactly the same way and they flood our body with these sorts of love hormones.

Eloise: But finding an animal or baby cute doesn’t just make us feel good. As Grace has already suggested, it’s also really important for their survival.

Deborah: If you imagine what would happen if we didn’t find our dogs cute, or we didn’t find our babies cute. We might not be so inclined to look after them. And so, if we look at a baby and we thought it was ugly, for example, we might not be inclined to look after it. And caring for something is really, really hard work, isn’t it? So, cute things are designed to capture our attention really, really quickly, trigger all of these positive emotions and all of these love chemicals that flood through our bodies and make us want to care for them. So we're sort of being tricked a little bit into wanting to care for something that we find cute.
And when you look at your dog with its lovely soft fur and its big eyes, you might feel a little bit gooey inside and want to give it cuddles and kisses and give it some food. And basically all of those things are helping to keep your dog alive.

**Eloise:** Do you feel all those happy, happy hormones going through you, Grace, when you spend time with Max?

**Grace:** Yes, definitely. I just love to play with him and cuddle him.

**Eloise:** Nice. And do you think that makes you feel more protective of him?

**Grace:** Yes, definitely, because if something's trying to hurt him, I would try and stop it.

**Deborah:** Well, interestingly enough, Grace, one study found that puppies were considered to be most appealing to people when they were aged between about eight to ten weeks of age. And this is the age that their mums would typically be weaning them and sort of trying to kick them away a little bit.

**Eloise:** So their mums are trying to get rid of them...

**Deborah:** And then we're tricked into coming along and looking after them in place of their actual biological mums.

**Eloise:** Which suggests humans find puppies cutest when they need to be looked after most. Which works out well for them!

**Grace:** I think that's really interesting.

**Eloise:** Cool, no?

**Eloise:** We humans tend to find all puppies cute. But we like our own pets the best.

**Deborah:** Have you any ideas, Grace, why we might find our own dogs particularly cute?
Grace: Maybe because it's like our own and it's like you want to protect them more, and with other dogs, you sort of don't know what they're like.

Deborah: Yeah, that's right, that's right, and what happens with dogs, and cats, of course, is that they become very quickly an important member of the family, don't they? You know, we celebrate their birthdays and we buy them presents. We might even dress them up. We might even give them human names. I mean, Max has got a fairly human name, hasn't he?

And so very quickly we develop very strong bonds of attachment with them and we become as fiercely protective of them as we would, you know, of our brothers or sisters or our children. And part of that is again, down to the fact that when we look at them, we get these love chemicals flooding through our body. But we also start to see some changes in our brain chemistry as well.

Eloise: Over time, these love chemicals start to rewire our brains so that we become better and better at taking care of our pets and babies.

Deborah: Obviously caring for a baby calls for a set of skills that take time to acquire and to hone, and so this slow attainment of expertise sort of changes the caregiver's brain.

Grace: That's really interesting.

Is it the same with other pets?

Deborah: Yeah, it's exactly the same with other pets. Perhaps more so for dogs and cats. It seems to be the case that people don't develop such a strong bond of attachment to things like guinea pigs.

Eloise: This is because often dogs and cats are very responsive to us, and show their emotions.

Deborah: They interact with us a lot more, which makes us bond with them more easily. So when we stroke our dog and we stroke our cat, the action of stroking them actually helps to calm us down. So again, we're getting something back again and it lowers our blood pressure, and lowers our heart rate. But we don't tend to get those benefits when we stroke a guinea pig, or a hamster, a little
bit more fidgety. And likewise a fish. It's really hard to interact with a fish, isn't it?

Eloise: How long have you had Max now?

Grace: Around two months.

Eloise: All this time you've been developing this beautiful relationship with him but, you know, hopefully that's only going to grow as he gets older and you'll also get better at caring for him

Grace: Yeah, definitely.

Eloise: and knowing what he needs and maybe even vice versa. He might come and comfort you sometimes.

Grace: Yeah.

Eloise: So the fact that we find dogs cute can be essential for their survival. But, amazingly, it can be bad for their survival too.

Grace: my dad told me that they tend to breed more cute dogs rather than some not like very cute dogs, so more people can buy them.

Deborah: Yeah, that's exactly right. So what's happening nowadays is that people are breeding dogs to look more and more cute to us. So they look a little bit more like teddy bears. They've got these very cute features. If you think about things like the Cockapoo.

Grace: Yeah.

Deborah: Or the Cavachon.

Grace: A Labrador?

Deborah: Yeah, the Labrador has got very big, cute eyes, but some of them are really small, aren't they? Um, the poodle, it's still very cute looking. The
Pomeranian, and these animals, they're very, very different, aren't they? To can you think of the ancestor to all of these dogs?

Grace: A wolf or a wild dog?

Deborah: Absolutely right. And does the wolf look like this?

Grace: no, no. They look really mean.

Eloise: Why do you think they look mean, Grace?

Grace: Because they're like growling at you, and like, they have this howl, everyone thinks they're really mean in like stories.

Deborah: Yeah. They have got a bad reputation, haven't they? I'm thinking of Little Red Riding Hood there. But they also look very different. So they've got a long nose, haven't they? Whereas if you think about a breed like the Cavachon or the Cockapoo, they've got a much shorter little nose. The wolf's also got quite pointy ears,

Grace: Not like floppy ears.

Deborah: Not floppy cute ears, you're right.

Eloise: So wolves are the ancestors of dogs, which means that over time wolves' genes have changed gradually to become dogs. But the crazy thing is that taming wolves to become more like dogs really changes the way they look!

Deborah: We know this as a result of research that's been carried out way back in the 1950s, on silver foxes.

Eloise: Foxes and wolves both belong to the canidae family, which means they are related.

Deborah: So what happened is that a Russian fox fur farmer set up an experiment to find out whether he could selectively breed the wildness out of the silver fox. And this is quite a hard to breed animal because it's quite an aggressive
animal. So in each generation of foxes what he did is he bred the animals that showed the least amount of aggression towards humans.

**Eloise:** So the mean ones? No, they did not have babies.

**Deborah:** And it took just 20 generations, so that's about 25 years, to create a line of silver foxes who were tame enough to be kept as pets. Now that might seem like a really long time to you, 25 years probably seems like a long time.

**Grace:** Very long time.

**Deborah:** But actually, in evolutionary terms, this is actually a really short time frame.

**Eloise:** Evolutionary is to do with evolving and evolution, which are words you may have heard. In nature, it takes quite a long time for one species to evolve into another species. Often thousands and thousands of years. But in the fur farmer’s experiment, this was much, much quicker!

**Deborah:** So it was quite an interesting result. But what they also discovered is that not only were the foxes becoming tamer, they also discovered accidentally that the foxes started to look really different. They had shorter faces, they had smaller teeth, soft and droopy ears, curly tails, and they had altered color. And do you know why this might be the case?

**Grace:** Because they bred them to be, like, cute and they would survive a lot longer with humans.

**Deborah:** Exactly. What they discovered is that these sorts of friendly behaviour are connected to the gene for their physical appearance. And the more friendly they bred these animals, the cuter these animals were also starting to look. And of course you're absolutely right. They would be more then appealing to humans. And that would encourage the humans, as we talked about earlier, to look after them. which of course is a survival tactic. It helps them to survive.

**Eloise:** That's really a crazy experiment.
Grace: Yeah, it's really, like, cool.

Eloise: Back to our Pomeranians and poodles...

Deborah: So, with all of this breeding that goes on, uh, Grace, you know, we're, we're generating these dogs that look further and further removed from their ancestor, the wolf, and we're sort of squidging their noses up. And we're changing their ears, you know, we've got the ears that were on top of the head and now instead they're long and dangly. Do you think that maybe breeding dogs to look this way, such as having flatter faces and shorter noses, do you think that these changes might be harmful to the animals themselves?

Grace: I don't really think so.

Eloise: I'll give you a clue.

Grace: Breathing.

Deborah: That's exactly it. And actually I bet you can think of a breed of dog that struggles a little bit with its breathing.

Grace: Is it a pug or something? It's really squished up.

Deborah: Yes, it's exactly that. So, a pug's a perfect example of a breed of dog that we have bred as humans to have a really flat face. And by having a flat face, it means that it's got a much shorter skull, which means that its nose and its tongue and its teeth are all crammed into a relatively small space. And this makes it much harder for them to breathe. And also on top of that, they can really overheat.

Grace: So they can like, pant.

Deborah: Exactly! They're having that's how they keep cool, isn't it? That's how a dog keeps cool because it can't sweat very well.

Grace: Yeah, so, they would die more quick in a way, than like other dogs that have longer noses and they aren't all squished up.
Deborah: Exactly that, exactly that. And sometimes they change their behaviour a little bit to try and help them breathe a little bit more easily. So they might, for example, adopt a sitting position when they're sleeping or they might raise their chins up or they might even sleep with a toy between their teeth to try and keep their airways open. And so for this reason, uh, some airlines, for example, won't allow the transport of some of these breeds on flights that are longer than five hours because they are concerned for their physical welfare.

Eloise: Luckily, people are becoming more aware of these health issues.

Deborah: And some people are even boycotting breeders who breed dogs to look this certain way, um, and instead to, to kind of place more importance on the physical welfare of the dogs.

Grace: Rather than the cuteness.

Deborah: Exactly. Yeah, exactly that.

Eloise: And I think that’s a good thing to remember: though it’s great for both us and our dogs that we find them cute, and we love to feel those happy hormones zinging around us, that shouldn’t be at the cost of their health. So if you’re thinking about buying a dog, just bear that in mind...

Deborah: Grace, it's been so lovely to chat to you, and you've asked some really sensible and thought provoking questions.

Grace: Thank you so.

Deborah: I’ve really enjoyed chatting to you and you’ve asked some really sensible and thought-provoking questions.

Eloise: Thank you Grace.

Grace: Thank you, bye!

Eloise: Gotta go, Max is putting on his puppy dog eyes...
**Grace:** Grace, can I play with you?

**Deborah:** I love it, I think everybody’s got a dog voice, haven’t they? I certainly do.

**Eloise:** Thanks for listening to this episode of The Conversation’s Curious Kids. If you’ve got a question for us, please do email us at curiouskids@theconversation.com, and we will do our best to answer it.

With thanks to Grace, Deborah Wells, and Gemma Ware, who executive produced this episode. It was produced, presented and sound designed by me, Eloise. See you soon!