
Animals to autism: The science of social bonds

easy-to-understand well-being research with Utah health advocates, statewide stakeholders, and the public.

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Animals to autism: The science of social bonds | Dr. Sara Freeman

What can animal brains teach us about people? How do the social bonds of certain animal species inform our understanding of ourselves?

Learning why some animals develop “attachment relationships” when most species don’t, can provide insights into human relationships and our brains, and might even offer another piece of the puzzle to understand disorders such as autism.

At Blue Plate Research, which was hosted on January 27 at Gallivan Hall in downtown Salt Lake City, [Dr. Sara Freeman](#) discussed her research in animal neurobiology and the impact the oxytocin system has on social function.

The event featured a presentation by Dr. Freeman, with a live question-and-answer session.

The hormone oxytocin, sometimes nicknamed the “love hormone”, provides a positive feedback loop in the brain, and research findings point toward the important role it plays in forming attachment relationships and neural development.

Social bonds in animals develop in many of the same ways they do in humans: two individuals participate in common activities, share food, groom each other, split parenting responsibilities, or show distress when they’re separated, for example.

While it’s far too early to say the number of oxytocin receptors in a person’s brain is a cause of autism, the evidence seems to indicate at least some connection. This could be an opportunity to develop treatment options for individuals who want them.

Presented by Utah State University and sponsored by Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Utah, Blue Plate Research is an event series that is focused on sharing