

## **The benefits of pet ownership for children**

Pets can play an important role in people's lives and they are often referred to as 'one of the family'. As well as providing a constant source of enjoyment, friendship and fun, many pets thrive in a family and household environment.

Many parents recognise the benefits of growing up with a family pet, especially if they themselves have had successful and close relationships with animals as children. Parents have traditionally encouraged children to respect and care for animals in the belief that this would enable children to become more caring, compassionate and responsible.

There's an increasing wealth of research proving that pet ownership has considerable educational and therapeutic benefits for children. Studies demonstrate children who interact with animals have higher levels of self esteem, have greater empathy and better social skills.

Those working in veterinary practice will have encountered many children for whom animals have helped increase confidence. Children with low self-esteem may talk to, or confide in, an animal in ways they would not with people. They are often more confident in performing tasks they find difficult with an animal simply because the animal does not care if mistakes are made, nor will the child be afraid of looking silly in front of the animal.

Parents, teachers and therapists can harness children's interest in animals to encourage them to talk about problems, to overcome shyness and to facilitate friendships with other children.

There is also evidence to show that children with emotional, social, learning or behaviour disorders can benefit enormously from the presence of and interaction with a companion animal. Typically children who are withdrawn become more confident in the presence of animals and participate more fully in lessons. Those who are hyperactive often become quiet, absorbed and more focused in lessons.

Studies in Australia found better school attendance in classrooms with animal mascots and a reduction in vandalism.

An Austrian study demonstrated improved behaviour, better attentiveness, a high level of co-operation between children, and reduced sound levels in a classroom following the introduction of therapy dogs to a mainstream primary school.

In the USA therapy dogs are now often utilised in a programme whereby children read to the dog. The dogs appear to listen intently, do not interrupt and do not correct the child. The children's reading ability has greatly improved.

Recent European studies have demonstrated that dog ownership exerts a protective influence on the behaviour of young people – reducing their likelihood of becoming involved with gang culture, drugs or crime.

Children in dog owning families also have more traditional values, better academic achievement and greater respect for their parents. I often witness positive attitudinal changes in young people following the introduction of animals to their lives. In learning to care for the animal, they are also acquiring foundation skills required for parenting. In addition, passage through the teenage years – a difficult time for many – is facilitated by a

relationship with a non- judgemental, ever supportive animal friend in whom one can confide fears and worries.

Dogs and other animals have also been found to help children with autism. Sometimes children who are electively mute start to talk to the dog, and gradually learn basic communication skills.

The animal magic goes beyond the therapeutic and educational to bring significant physical health benefits too. One of the more obvious benefits is that of exercise - dog walking or playing with a cat is a great way for people to burn a few more calories. This is particularly important when lifestyles are becoming increasingly sedentary and obesity is a growing issue, for children and adults. The Pet Health Council runs a 'Petsercise' programme which encourages people and their pets to get fit and healthy together. Many families are now acquiring pets to encourage children, especially boys, to spend more time in the "real", rather than the "virtual" world.

Research has also shown that pets have an important role to play in building up a child's immune system. Children who live with a cat or dog in their first years of life have a lower incidence of hay fever and asthma and are less likely to develop animal-related allergies. Recent studies also show that the immune systems of children (particularly between the ages of five and eight) of pet-owning families are more stable than those of children from non-pet owning families - the result being that making pet-owning children are better able to fend off illness.

Interacting with pets can also help to release endorphins into the brain. A number of hospitals now include a pet therapy programme, the aim is to make young patients feel relaxed and comfortable by having animals around in a medical environment. The positive interaction with pet animals has also been proven to speed up the patient recovery process. Several organizations can provide visitations by accredited animals and handler's health and social care institutions and to schools.

As a result of these recognised benefits, many successful programmes have been introduced to schools and health and social care settings. You may ask why animals help so much. It's because children often find them easier to relate to (the world of grown-ups is often quite confusing!) and they know that animals will not judge them, will not 'break friends' with them, and will not tell tales. The presence of animals in institutional settings creates a more homely and less intimidating atmosphere. Animals are also a great stimulus for improved health. The power of pet magic is really quite tremendous.

#### **Notes to editors:**

The Pet Health Council promotes, informs and advises on the health and welfare of pet animals in the interests of both pets and people. We have the latest news and research regarding pet issues, the benefits of pet ownership. To find out more, please visit: [www.pethealthcouncil.co.uk](http://www.pethealthcouncil.co.uk)