

## The Positive Power of Pet Ownership

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In the short video at the link below, Dr. Lynette Hart of the University of California, Davis School of Veterinary Medicine discusses how companion animals positively influence human behavior and activity.

Companion animals have a calming influence on people. You can see this when you bring an animal into a classroom – the children immediately lower their noise level. A similar phenomenon can be seen with groups of Alzheimer's patients in a nursing home setting.

The result is that companion animals can be used tactically to create better learning environments in classrooms, and to improve the general atmosphere for residents of assisted living facilities.

The calming effect of animals also has a more general application as protection against loneliness, depression and anxiety in people whose circumstances make them vulnerable to those emotions.

Psychotherapists who use animals in their treatment rooms report more productive sessions with tense, anxious patients. These patients become calm and relaxed when an animal is brought into the room during their session.

The psychoanalytic theory behind the calming influence of companion animals is self-psychology and refers to animals as self objects. One of the functions of a self object is to mirror the "self" in a very positive, reflective way – similar to how a warm, accepting mother reflects back to her children they are wonderful people. This is how children learn who they are – by the way the world responds to them.

Companion animals have the ability to reflect back to you that very positive, accepting response, letting you know you're a special person. It is this mirroring that may account for the tremendously calming effect of animals.

Research also shows that people are simply more sociable – more relaxed and accepting of others

-- when an animal is present.

Companion animals also motivate their owners to participate in more activities, and in the case of dogs, to get regular exercise.

### **Dr. Becker's Comments**

I know it comes as no surprise to pet owners to read that your beloved companion animal adds immeasurably to the quality of your life.

If you own a dog, there's nothing to compare with the greeting you receive from your pup when you come through the door at the end of a long day. There's something about a pair of warm, soulful eyes at one end and an eagerly wagging tail at the other that lifts your spirits and makes the day's burdens disappear in an instant.

If you're owned by a cat, you sense all is right with the world when your purring furball curls into your lap for the evening. As you stroke your kitty's soft coat, a feeling of contentment settles over you.

### **A Pet Can Improve Your Marriage**

A [study](#) conducted about a dozen years ago revealed that married couples with pets felt more satisfied with their unions than couples without companion animals.

For newly married young people who both enjoy animals, it's commonplace to acquire a pet – or several. Through caring for their furry “children,” newlyweds are able to gain insight into how each partner deals with responsibility, illness, sharing and jealousy.

Pets are known to reduce the inevitable stress between partners in a marriage, and also encourage social interaction with others.

Other ways a companion animal can enhance your marriage:

Pets are attentive Pets provide physical touch Your dog or cat can comfort you or your spouse during times of disappointment or loss Your pet accepts you unconditionally and is not

judgmental Having a pet around can trigger positive memories Dogs and cats are full of cute and funny behaviors that can increase the joy and laughter in your home

## **Kids and Pets**

Studies show that children who are attached to their pets tend to function better emotionally. Your child's self-esteem is enhanced by owning a pet.

Helping to care for the family pet teaches children how to nurture a dependent creature. And the positive feedback your child receives from you for caring for a pet helps him to feel competent and responsible.

When a child interacts with a pet that is totally dependent on its owners, she learns to understand the needs and feelings of animals, which naturally translates over time to a desire to understand the needs and feelings of people. This is how your youngster learns compassion and empathy for other living things.

Your child's pet also provides an important form of social and emotional support. Whereas social feedback given by humans can feel critical and threatening, the nonjudgmental support offered by a beloved pet makes your child feel unconditionally accepted.

Family pets can also facilitate teaching your children about important life events like birth and death. Helping your child to understand and express feelings of sadness and loss when a pet dies or is euthanized can influence how he copes with the experience of death throughout his life.

## **Pets: Good for Your Body, Good for Your Soul**

There's ample evidence pets can positively influence a number of medical conditions. Pet ownership can help to:

**Lower blood pressure** Lower cholesterol levels Improve cardiovascular health Relieve the depression associated with serious illnesses like AIDS Improve survival rates after a heart attack From a psychological and emotional standpoint, your pet gives you something to live for and focus on other than yourself. Self-absorption is a serious detriment to good health.

It feels good to be needed and your pet depends on you – even if your family does not. Being needed motivates you to stay well.

Studies have shown that interacting with pets is actually more beneficial than interacting with

friends when it comes to your blood pressure. Human friends can be judgmental –your four-legged buddy accepts you exactly as you are in every moment of your life together.

Part of the reason we connect so deeply with animals may be their emotional depth. Studies show that many animals mourn, cry, and demonstrate other ranges of emotion. If you share your life with a pet, you know the love it feels for you is intense and enduring.