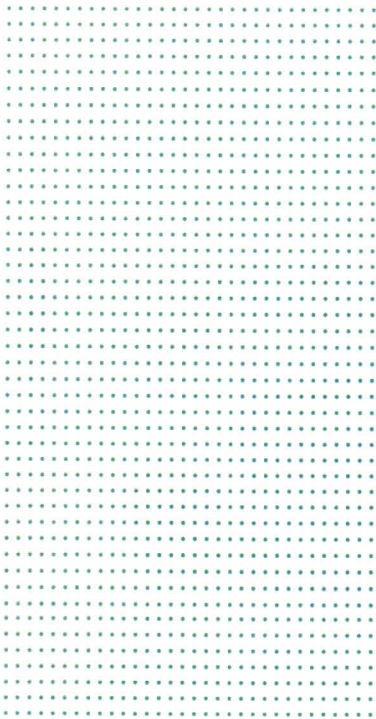


photos GETTY IMAGES (TOP LEFT, TOP RIGHT, CENTER RIGHT, BOTTOM MIDDLE); ALLEGRA ANDERSON (TOP MIDDLE); ALEXIS WEST-HUNTOON (CENTER LEFT, BOTTOM RIGHT)



DOGS HELPING KIDS

THRIVE



RESEARCH AND
REAL LIFE SHOW
HOW INTERACTION
WITH THERAPY AND
SERVICE DOGS CAN
BENEFIT CHILDREN
WHO NEED HELP.

By JEN REEDER



photos: ALLEGRA ANDERSON (TOP); ALEXIS WEST-HUNTOON (ALL OTHERS)



Few sights touch our hearts as much as seeing children playing or cuddling with pets. But science shows these scenes aren't just cute; interacting with animals can benefit kids in myriad ways.

One important way dogs, cats, and "pocket pets" such as hamsters positively impact kids developmentally is by being one of their first friends.

"They can talk to animals without any fear of judgment or repercussion," says Alan Beck, Sc.D., director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University's College of Veterinary Medicine. "Animals just never betray you."

Caring for a pet can also be the first time children are rewarded for acting as nurturers. What's more, Beck says a study of children with diabetes found that feeding fish led to the kids taking better care of themselves by managing their disease. Another study found that students caring for classroom guinea pigs together led to greater acceptance of kids with autism by typically developing classmates.

"Animals can help children with disabilities be more appreciated as people, as opposed to carriers of a disability," Beck says.

Steven Feldman, executive director of the Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI), a nonprofit that maintains a database of approximately 30,000 scientific studies on pets, agrees that research shows caring for animals can help children develop empathy, responsibility, and leadership.

In terms of physical health, Feldman says prenatal exposure to dogs (most research so far is dog-specific) strengthens the immune system. Studies also found babies exposed to pets developed stronger immune systems and were less likely to have asthma later in life. There was also evidence of fewer ear infections and reduced need for antibiotics.

"Early childhood exposure is the important part because that's when kids' immune systems are still learning to recognize friend and foe," he says.

Feldman emphasizes that parents must assume responsibility for providing a safe

home environment. This involves training pets as well as teaching children to be gentle with animals.

"That's a formula for a strong human-animal bond and a successful relationship between the kids and the animals they love," he says.

Helen Holmquist-Johnson, Ph.D., MSW, director of Colorado State University's Human-Animal Bond in Colorado (HABIC) program, says a four-year study of 160 elementary and middle school students from 18 schools evaluated the impact of animal-assisted therapy for at-risk students. Students set goals including decreasing bullying and anger, following directions, being more honest, and making friends. After interacting with therapy dogs at their schools, the students met their goals, says the HABIC report.

Holmquist-Johnson says HABIC

continues to measure student outcomes from animal-assisted therapy sessions, and she believes it can positively impact children.

"Animal-assisted interventions are increasingly being used in school-based settings to address trauma-related needs," she says.

Robin Ganzert, Ph.D., president and CEO of the national nonprofit American Humane, says the organization has been conducting a "Pets in the Classroom" study to evaluate the effects of having a classroom animal. In the first phase, researchers found the

animals help students learn more about nature and science, build leadership and character, and reduce stress and unstable behaviors, especially for kids with autism and other special needs.

"Thanks to a grant from The Pet Care Trust, we are starting to show with data what we already knew in our hearts about some of the positive effects animals can have on children," Ganzert says. "In many ways, animals teach all of us to be not only more humane but also more human, making us better people. I can't think of a better outcome than that."

"ANIMALS CAN HELP CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES BE MORE APPRECIATED AS PEOPLE, AS OPPOSED TO CARRIERS OF A DISABILITY."

—Alan Beck

photos: GETTY IMAGES (THIS PAGE); ALEXIS WEST-HUNTOON (OPPOSITE)



2-YEAR-OLD GOLDENDOODLE WITH THE CANINE ASSISTANTS PROGRAM

SANSA

Hospitals can be intimidating for anyone, but for kids, they can be downright scary. That's why Children's Hospital & Medical

"SHE'S JUST COMPELLED TO BE THEIR DOCTOR FOR EMOTIONS, I THINK."

—Debbie Snyder

Center in Omaha has two hospital facility dogs to support children and their families through diagnosis and treatment.

Debbie Snyder, CCLS, a child life specialist at Children's, works with Sansa, a 2-year-old goldendoodle she describes as silly. They primarily visit patients who need chemotherapy or dialysis in the infusion center. When Snyder shows kids medical equipment and explains how an IV works, they can pet or snuggle Sansa, which is a terrific comfort and distraction.

The pup will sit with them during treatment—sometimes in their lap.

"She knows what to do and settles right in," Snyder says. "She's just compelled to be their doctor for emotions, I think."

Sansa also helps with rehabilitation, motivating kids to start walking again after major surgery. If they need to practice putting on socks, they can put a sock on Sansa's paw.

Recently a little girl needed to receive a series of painful intramuscular injections. The girl would hold onto Sansa and cry during each session, but afterward, she'd take Sansa for a walk to help work the pain out of her leg. It amazed Snyder to see the girl transition so quickly from tears to laughter.

"Kids are just so brave," she says. "I'm inspired by all the things they do. I'm glad that Sansa and I get to make it better."

ANDY

GOLDEN
RETRIEVER
WITH THE
NONPROFIT
TAILS OF JOY



Reading out loud is an important developmental activity for children, but it can be embarrassing for the ones who find it difficult. Luckily, therapy dogs are nonjudgmental and never interrupt anyone to correct their pronunciation.

Sandy Lok, president of Tails of Joy, a Connecticut-based nonprofit that specializes in therapy dog reading programs, has listened to countless children read books to her dogs (currently Andy and Grant). “The goal is to make reading a good experience, to help build their confidence, to help them learn that reading is a lot of fun,” she explains.

Since 2006, Lok and her golden retrievers have volunteered at Verplanck Elementary School, which her now-grown children once attended. In one-on-one sessions, Lok, one of her dogs, and a child will sit on the floor to read together. If a child speaks softly, Lok will point out that golden retrievers have big floppy ears covered in fur, so it’s important to speak up so they can hear the story.

“There’s never been any stigma attached to any child who reads to the dog at school,” she says. “It makes the kids feel very special.”

It’s been so successful that Lok

“THE GOAL IS TO MAKE READING A GOOD EXPERIENCE.”
—Sandy Lok

started a reading program at the local library that immediately proved popular. Each dog has a signature move that sets kids at ease: Grant “hugs” by resting his head on a reader’s shoulder and leaning in; Andy rests his chin on the page being read.

“This is the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done because you see results within each session,” Lok says.

photos ALLEGRA ANDERSON (THIS PAGE); ALEXIS WEST-HUNTOON (OPPOSITE)



LABRADOR
RETRIEVER
WITH GOOD
DOG! AUTISM
COMPANIONS

CHARLIE

After Cade Bryson was diagnosed with autism around the age of 3, he grew increasingly overstimulated in public places, often yelling or having meltdowns. He became so anxious about being separated from his mother, Amanda, that he didn't want to go to school.

"His anxiety increased and life just became harder," his mom recalls.

When her husband, Bill, a U.S. Marine, deployed overseas, he happened to meet a child with an autism service dog. He texted Amanda, who immediately started researching and found the California-based nonprofit Good Dog! Autism Companions, which trains and places autism service dogs with families across the country. When Cade was 11, he partnered with Charlie, a Labrador retriever, and everything changed.

**"I DON'T
THINK PEOPLE
UNDERSTAND HOW
DRAMATICALLY
THESE ANIMALS
CAN CHANGE
YOUR LIFE."**

—Amanda Bryson

Charlie is trained to apply pressure to calm Cade when he starts becoming overstimulated and lies on him at night so he can fall asleep. She goes with him to school—tail wagging nonstop as they walk into the building—and has helped Cade make friends. The family can go to church without worrying about disruptive outbursts, which used to mortify Cade's younger brother, and now enjoys going to music concerts and professional sporting events together.

"Charlie is Cade's service dog, but she's like an emotional support dog to the rest of us. I'm a better mom and a better wife because she has helped our family in such a way that I never thought was possible," Amanda says. "I don't think people understand how dramatically these animals can change your life."