

CHILDREN WHO LIVE WITH DOGS

If you want something different, do something different.

by Dr. Carmen Battaglia

BACKGROUND

Every child at some point begs their parents for a puppy. If you were one of those parents or if you know one, here is what most likely happened. The parent immediately begins to think about all of the added chores and financial obligations that come with owning a puppy.

Most parents want their children to be happy, healthy, smart and successful, and they do so by enrolling them in good schools. Most do not consider the advantages of having a dog as a way to achieve some of those goals and most are surprised when they learn they may have overlooked the many hidden benefits to dog ownership.

Over the past 20 years, science and technology have made a number of discoveries that confirm a long list of benefits for children who live with a dog. Among them are better physical and emotional health and better social relationships as an adult. Published studies show that pet involvement has many advantages and they come in a variety of different forms. For some, it is the experiences of growing up with and caring for a family dog or participating in a dog sport. For others, it is living in a neighborhood where on a regular basis the children play with a friend's dog.

INFANCY AND BEYOND

A collection of scientific studies outlined by Nienke Endenburg



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and Ben Baarda, *The Role of Pets in Studies Enhancing Human Well-being: Effects on Child Development*, reported that pets in a home have many positive effects on a child's mental and physical health.

The research collected about children and dogs is summarized in this paper which shows there are at least seven benefits to having a dog.

1. Improved Health and Immune Systems

Studies in Pediatric Health concluded that children who lived with a dog during their first year of life had a better immune system than those who did not, and that those exposed to a dog during infancy when sick needed a shorter course of antibiotics compared to children who did not live with a dog or a pet.

Besides these benefits, early exposure to a dog was also found to be a major benefit to developing resistance to allergies. Young children who played with a dog were found to be more physically active and less likely to develop allergies. Their parents also benefited. In families where at least one parent was suffering from allergies or asthma the likelihood of other members developing a similar illness declined if they had a dog in the house. In homes with dogs, children and their families were found to be better protected against the risk for eczema and those without a dog in the home were four times more likely to develop eczema.

Puppies and dogs also provided other benefits. Pets are one of the best ways to pry kids off the couch and away from screen time. On average, children who have a dog exercise an average of 11 minutes more per day than those who do not have a dog. When added up, those minutes total to 5.5 hours a month and 66 hours per year! Some researchers believe that dog ownership may be a viable way to help combat childhood obesity.

2. Less Stress and Happier

Researchers and teachers noticed that stress levels decreased when young children played with a dog and when they read aloud to a dog. Playing with a dog decreases their levels of serotonin and dopamine. Petting decreases the level of cortisol and increases the level of Oxytocin which is a chemical that occurs during times of happiness, courtship and at birth when a newborn is nursing with their mother. It is also known to calm the mind and increase one's mood.

3. Higher self-esteem

Simple tasks such as allowing a 3-year-old to put the food and water bowl down were found to be good examples. Kids who were given tasks to complete, such as helping to care for a pup or dog, were found to have improved self-esteem.

Empathy is learned when a child interacts with a parent who encourages them to help in the care and nurturing of a dependent animal. Multiple studies have shown that children who grew up living with a pup or a dog were more likely to be empathetic towards others as an adult.

4. Improved cognitive skills

Several researchers found that children often named their pet when asked who they would go to with a problem. One report found that "Pets can make people feel unconditionally accepted, whereas fellow humans will judge and criticize". Several researchers noted that kids

who talked to their dog whether by giving praise, commands or just babbling, showed improved cognitive development.

5. Become More Responsible

Having a puppy or dog was also found to improve the likelihood of a child becoming a more responsible person as an adult. Getting a child involved with their pet's care prepares them for handling responsibilities later in life. For example, teaching a child about the needs of a puppy or dog, such as regular potty breaks and involving them at their dog's mealtime improves their understanding of scheduling, time requirements and other needs of an animal which helps teach them to handle more responsibility as an adult. Another example of teaching responsibility was found in the kids who saved their allowance and used some of it toward paying for dog food or other necessities. Those who attended training classes with a parent also learned about the value of planning, preparation and the importance and the value of regular practice sessions.

6. Better Emotional Intelligence (EQ)

EQ is a measure of child's emotional intelligence, meaning their emotional skills. These are learned and acquired over time as children become involved in the care for another's life. Learning to take care of a puppy or dog requires becoming more compassionate. It occurs when children learn to: feed, brush and walk their dog on a regular basis. These activities oftentimes compete with other activities they might rather be doing. Thus, the caring for a puppy or dog promotes learning to step outside the time normally used for themselves which helps them practice being selfless. Teachers who studied this skill in children reported that having a pet is an invaluable aid to helping them gain pride in caring, and empathy for the needs of themselves and others". In addition to improving EQ, caring for a dog builds a child's self-esteem which they accomplish through small tasks: filling up their water dish, grooming, walking and putting things away all help improve how they feel about themselves and their sense of accomplishment.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) found that children with puppies and dogs in the home had reduced anxiety levels and reduced amounts of perceived stress. Researchers at the Johns Hopkins Medicine Center reported that children who cuddle with their dog decrease their cortisone levels which is a hormone associated with stress. The CDC also found that kids who interacted with dogs were also found to have increased levels of Oxytocin released into their brains.

AUTISM

One in 45 children in the United States is diagnosed with autism (ASD) which is nearly 2% of the entire population of children ages 2-17. The Good Dog organization reported that therapy dogs have an amazing impact on the quality of life and development of children with ASD. Some of the benefits include:

- Providing a sense of security
- Decreasing meltdowns
- Decreasing anxiety and acts of aggression
- Increasing a willingness to try new things
- Increases the ability to face fearful situations

- Increases social interactions and shifts the focus away from the child's disability
- Encourages verbal communication

The Drake Center's involvement with Good Dog! Autism Companions studied 6.4 million children in the United States who had been diagnosed with ADHD which is increasing at the rate of almost 2% a year. Some of the benefits to children who lived with a dog in their home included:

- Dogs helped create consistency and a routine
- Provided an outlet for excess energy to help aid hyperactivity
- Helped the child cope with isolation and depression
- Took some of the stress out of new social situations

Until recently there were no current studies evaluating the impact of children in dog sports or their success and impact on them later in life. The earliest effort occurred in 1932 when the American Kennel Club, (Westbury Kennel Association) offered the first "Children's Handling Class" (Battaglia). A more recent study confirms the value of dogs in the life of very young children, teenagers and those over 18 years of age (Loonsk).

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Carmen L. Battaglia holds a Ph.D. and Master's Degree from Florida State University. He is an author of many articles, several books, an AKC Director, judge and researcher. He is a well-known lecturer and leader in the promotion of breeding better dogs. Dr. Battaglia is also a popular guest on TV and radio talk shows including several appearances on Animal Planet. His seminars on breeding better dogs, selecting sires and choosing puppies have been well-received by breed clubs. Those interested in learning more about his writings and seminars should visit the website :

<http://www.breedingbetterdogs.com>