



It's a dog's (social) life

Dogs are great for our social lives, say researchers. They even make us seem more trustworthy

YOUR neighbours should thank you for owning a dog, because it's probably making them healthier and happier, according to an Australian study.

The study found the benefits of owning pets extended beyond their immediate owners to the wider community.

Dogs in particular increased the likelihood of their owners meeting other people within their street and suburb.

Of those who walked their dog, 84 per cent of people talked to other pet owners on the way.

"Dogs are the main pets who get out of the house, so they are facilitators of social contact," said Dr Lisa Wood, of the University of Western Australia.

She said a common view among survey participants was that pets served as an icebreaker and a neutral topic of conversation.

While other studies had focused on the health benefits to owners, Dr Wood said an important finding of her study was that it was not just owners who benefited.

Other people in the neighbourhood enjoyed meeting people with dogs and liked seeing dog-walkers around the streets, she said.

Dr Wood said visible pet owners, especially dog-walkers, gave non-pet owners a sense of safety on their

streets.

She said nearly two-thirds of Australian households had pets, outnumbering homes with children.

And 37 per cent of households owned a dog.

Dr Wood's study found 40 per cent of pet owners had got to know other people in their suburb through their pet.

And 76 per cent said owning a dog encouraged them to walk in their suburb more frequently.

"From people's anecdotes, we saw that a lot of people own pets and if they see a pet owner they have something in common," Dr Wood said.

"People who have pets are seen as more trustworthy."

She said pets acted as a catalyst for interaction between neighbours in the form of an exchange of favours.

"With neighbours, there is kind of an initial shyness," Dr Wood said.

"Often a little favour exchange will lead to a relationship between neighbours . . . they'll look after a pet and then perhaps the kids later on."

Her study surveyed 339 people in three Perth suburbs.

Dr Wood said owning a pet could be described as 'social capital'.

"Social capital is about networks, trust and relationships between people that bind them together," she said.

Dr Wood said it was the social glue that held communities together and was often described as a sense of community.

The study found the potential negative consequences of having pets in suburban neighbourhoods, such as barking and dog bites, was minimal compared with the benefits of pet ownership, including the social

contact animals generated for their owners.

ENTERTAINING YOUR DOG

Most people live busy lives so often the dogs are left alone for long periods and only get short periods of attention in the evening. It is no wonder they are so excited to see us.

Most dogs — particularly young dogs — are looking for things to do during the day to keep themselves amused. Unfortunately they often find things to do that can cause problems for us or our neighbours.

Chewing, barking, digging, escaping or overzealous guarding can all be signs your dog has energy to burn. Don't be concerned if you only have a small back yard, a big backyard can be as boring as a small one, the size is far less important than what takes place there.

Exercise and concerted activity when you are present is important to wear out your dog so that they sleep more when you are not present.

This can be an uphill challenge for some dogs as they seem to have limitless energy but it is still worth the effort.

Simple tricks can help distract your dog. Taking dry dog food and scattering it through the garden is a useful technique for amusing dogs.

Most dogs will spend hours looking for every last piece even if they found them all in the first five minutes.

Putting food in Kongs or treat balls make acquiring food more difficult and extend meal time for up to an hour.

Think of things you can change in your backyard to keep it entertaining.

Providing raw bones or toys to chew on is worthwhile.

Take care if you have more than one dog that they don't fight over them.

Rotate their toys every few days to keep the toys exciting.

Make a play date with another dog. You can even try dog socialisation classes.

We all enjoy a variety, your dog is no different, environmental enrichment is important for all our pets.



Perfect companions

Compared with people without pets, pet owners:

- > Typically visit the doctor less often and use less medication
- > Have lower cholesterol and lower blood pressure on average
- > Recover more quickly from illness and surgery
- > Deal better with stressful situations
- > Are less likely to report feeling lonely

Source: Petcare Information and Advisory Service



**Actress Abbie Cornish
with her dog Spot**