



Pets attract people to the neighbourhood

Seeing others walking their dogs contributes to sense of community

Pets will soon be the key motivation for people looking to buy a home if recent research at the University of Western Australia is anything to go by.

According to Dr Lisa Wood from the University's School of Population Health, there is more to owning a pet than the well known one-on-one benefits.

Research results show that pet ownership also has a beneficial ripple effect for the whole community.

"Non-pet owners spontaneously identified people walking dogs as one of the ways in which they get to know and recognise neighbours and other residents within their suburb," Dr Wood said.

"Dog owners also identified social contact resulting from being out with their dogs.

"The visible presence of people walking dogs seems to contribute to feelings of collective safety and a generalised sense of community."

For Coorparoo resident Clarissa Blake, the research results were unsurprising. She makes a point of taking her Maltese Cross King Charles Spaniel, Isabella, to areas where she and Isabella can interact socially.

Despite recently moving from Tenerife to Coorparoo, Clarissa takes the trip to the New Farm Dog Park with Isabella at least once a week because of the sense of familiarity about the area.

"There are a few dog owners that regularly gather in the New Farm Dog Park and others who regularly walk their dogs along the river pathway," Clarissa said.

Having a pet in common with others is a great conversation starter and can lead to discussions about all sorts of things from current affairs to events in the local community.

Dr Wood presented a paper, More Than a Furry Companion: The Ripple Effect of Pets on Neighbourhood Interactions and Social Capital, at the 37th Public Health Association of

Australia's conference in Sydney recently.

Key findings from the research show:

- ▶ 40.5% of pet owners said they had got to know other people in their suburb through their pet, with dog walking being the activity that was most likely to initiate contact;

- ▶ 83.8% of dog walkers talked to other pet owners while out walking their dog;

- ▶ Pet owners were 57% more likely to be civically engaged than non-pet owners;

- ▶ Pet owners were 74% more likely to have a high social capital score compared with non-pet owners;

- ▶ 82.5% of dog owners felt safer in their homes because of owning a dog; and

- ▶ The odds of feeling lonely more frequently were twice as high among non-pet owners as pet owners.

"The concept of 'social capital' is emerging as a key measure of community well-being. Essentially, it looks at factors such as the willingness of people to assist their neighbours and work together as a community, as well as the level of trust or interaction between people within a suburb," Dr Wood said.

"Dog ownership specifically contributed to people feeling a sense of community and getting to know others, and pet ownership contributed to an overall high score on the social capital scale,"

Clarissa agreed that increased communication and community awareness are definitely benefits of being friendly with other pet owners in the community.

According to Dr Wood, nearly two thirds of Australian households have pets, outnumbering the number of homes with children, internet connections and DVD players.

"Given the high rates of pet residency in Australia, there is merit in further consideration by policy makers of the link between pets and community health, social capital and well-being," she said.



Clarissa Blake takes her dog to areas where they can interact socially