



PARENTS+KIDS

Connie Clarke

Get a furry family member

Pets are always glad to see you and also have a positive effect on children.

Welcoming a furry friend into the fold could have more benefits than parents ever thought, but doing your homework is the key. If your children have been nagging you for years about getting a family pet, and you can't see past the mess, cost and madness that animals often bring, researchers can vouch for a long list of benefits.

In fact, studies show that pets can have positive effects on a child's level of physical activity, sense of wellbeing and level of responsibility, while enhancing their understanding of the life cycle, often introducing young children to the concepts of death, loss and grief.

International and Australian research has shown a clear link between pet ownership and increased activity with associated social and emotional benefits including better mental health and a greater sense of community, according to Lisa Wood of the University of WA's School of Population Health.

"The most recent child and adolescent activity survey that involved children in WA from primary and secondary schools showed that the most commonly reported play activity for girls was playing with their pet, while it was second or third for boys," Associate Professor Wood said.

"The research showed that incidental activity occurred during the rough and tumble of play with a pet in the backyard. In the context of rising levels of obesity and sedentary behaviour, the incidental play becomes very important.

"This most recent research suggests that kids having a pet not only increases their physical activity, but provides them with an emotional outlet during play.

"The other benefits children get are the same as those that are well demonstrated for adults, such as companionship, a perceived sense of sympathy from the animal and someone to do things with.

"Some of the literature shows that children can learn important life lessons from having a pet and learn to develop a sense of responsibility, even if it's just learning to put water in the dog's bowl or seed in the birdcage."

Professor Wood said more profound life lessons were learnt through the death of a pet, introducing children to the concepts of grief and loss in a safe environment.

"Even when there is a sad event like the death of a pet, which can be traumatic, children are learning all the time about life," she said. "So whether it's learning to know when the dog needs to be let outside or fed, or something like illness or death, children are gaining a sense of empathy and learning to care about someone other than themselves."

Case studies and anecdotal evidence also suggested that parents were more likely to allow children over the age of 10 to walk unaccompanied by an adult if they were walking the family dog. New data suggested parents felt a sense of assurance and peace of mind when children were accompanied by a canine companion.

She said the physical, emotional and social benefits of a family pet were often intertwined, with increased physical activity often leading to stronger social links with other pet owners in the community.

Child counsellor Anna Amhrose said while the rewards and benefits of pet ownership were ample, parents should do their homework before introducing pets into the family structure. Ms Amhrose, who has practised at the Mt Lawley Counselling Centre since 2006 and has worked as a child counsellor for 15 years, said parents should consider the impact of a pet on the whole family, and choose pets that were appropriate for the age and maturity level of a child.

"If you get a pet for a child under three, then you can expect to be doing most of the work," Ms Amhrose said.

"Families need to be realistic and do their homework.

"There are some definite benefits to having a family pet in the area of pro-social development, where children can learn about empathy, reading non-verbal cues and care giving. At the same time they are developing their values of commitment and responsibility.

"However, parents should be aware that putting a puppy under the Christmas tree doesn't automatically mean that



children will instantly learn those things, it takes a lot of work and commitment from the whole family.”

Ms Amhrose said parents could ask to care for a neighbour’s dog for a week, and set the children feeding and toileting tasks to introduce them to the reality of caring for a pet. She said easy-care pets such as rodents and guinea pigs were ideal for children aged between three and 10. Children between the ages of 10 and 13 could be expected to manage the daily care of a rabbit, cat or dog.

The death of a pet presented an opportunity for parents to discuss challenging topics with their children, including the nature of the life cycle and their own religious beliefs.

PhD student Maggie O’Haire from the School of Psychology at the University of Queensland said animals

showed unconditional love, allowing children to form strong bonds and develop their social and emotional skills.

“Animals are non-judgmental, they are not socially aware,” Ms O’Haire said.

“An animal doesn’t care if a child has a disability. They’re always going to be excited to see you. Statistics show that 70 per cent of households with pets also have children, so parents are already seeking this out as a positive experience for their children.”

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Tips for a happy household

- Choose a pet that is age appropriate — children under three do not have the maturity to look after pets.
- Complete a trial run by getting a pet from the Cat Haven or borrowing a pet from other family members or neighbours so children understand the needs of another living creature.
- Consult other family members because rearing a pet is a job for the whole family
- Pets can be a source of family conflict, so develop a plan of action should this arise.

SOURCE: CHILD COUNSELLOR ANNA AMHROSE, MT LAWLEY COUNSELLING CENTRE



Best friends:
 Kids benefit
 from a pet.



THE BENEFITS of PETS

HEALTHIER KIDS

Families with pets, particularly dogs, walk more often and maintain a healthier weight than non-pet families, according to Jo Salmon, the national Heart Foundation's research fellow at Deakin University. "Our studies show huge benefits to activity levels," Professor Salmon said. "Our sample of five to six-year-olds and 10 to 12-year-olds showed that there were significant health benefits, particularly in the older age group. Dog ownership was significantly associated with children's frequency of total walking per week."

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PhD student Maggie O'Haire from the School of Psychology at the University of Queensland has studied the interaction between children and pets in the classroom setting for three years. Her research showed that a child's sense of empathy and their nurturing instincts grew through

interacting with pets. "About 75 per cent of the children in our study showed an increased interest in attending school and were very attentive to the animals' needs," she said. "They learned about care and compassion and animals also reduce anxiety. Just stroking an animal or being around them can calm people, including children. Parents reported an increase in empathy in the home, with children showing more consideration of their siblings." Lisa Wood of UWA's School of Population Health said the emotional benefits of having someone in the home that loves you just the way you are was very important for a child's emotional development.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

"Children are extremely motivated by animals," Ms O'Haire said. "It can be a really positive experience for a child either at home or in the classroom. It brings the children together over a common interest,



Good dog: Pets aid wellbeing.

and teaches them to communicate better and work together." Professor Wood said pets often provided a sense of togetherness for families. "Pets become part of the family and families become more active in the process," she said.