
Pets Positively Benefit Child Development

For over 15,000 years across the globe, humans have been domesticating animals as pets (American Museum of Natural History). Domesticated animals have been used for a large number of purposes, such as hunting, entertainment, protection, and long-lasting companionship. Not only are pets beneficial for adults -- they can positively impact children in a multitude of ways that last all the way into adulthood. For instance, as John Grogan reflects in his award-winning autobiography, *Marley and Me*, "He [his childhood dog] came into my life and I into his—and in the process, he gave me the childhood every kid deserves." This adult's fond reminiscing is an attestation that every child should undergo what it is like to care for a pet because it is a life-changing, positive experience that leaves a strong, lasting imprint. From a psychological, physical and economic standpoint, childhood pet ownership positively impacts the evolution of personality by increasing compassion, furthermore resulting in deep overall happiness; developing important life skills, i.e. responsibility, and teaching life lessons, i.e. the concept of mortality; and improving physical health by strengthening the immune system and increasing physical activity.

To begin, building a relationship with a pet can provide a deeper experience of joy. In an analysis of a scientific study on socio-emotional variables, author Vlasta Vlivodic states that "Children who scored higher than average on the attachment to pets scale showed significantly higher scores on the empathy and prosocial orientation scales than non-owners and children who scored lower than average on the attachment to pets scale" (Vlivodic). These higher scores are a result of the fact that caring for a pet requires the development of both empathy and compassion. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another (Oxford). When caring for an animal, a person must be empathetic in order to understand what the animal needs or wants, which strengthens the relationship and bond between the animal and human. Empathy goes hand-and-hand with compassion, the sympathetic pity, and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others (Oxford). As stated in "Have You Renounced Pleasure" from *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* by the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "...we can also experience happiness at the deeper level through our mind, such as through love, compassion, and generosity...While the joy of the senses is brief, the joy at this deeper level is much longer-lasting." This quote suggests that the strong emotion of compassion has a noteworthy overall impact on human well-being in the long run due to it running deeper than the temporary joy brought by materialistic items. While the act of purchasing and owning a pet could be considered materialistic, growing up with a pet teaches compassion and therefore nurtures the deep happiness discussed by Dalai Lama and Tutu.

Furthermore, it is provident to mention that exposure to pets at a young age can reduce the risk of developing a psychiatric disorder in the future. In a study reported by the Natural Health Research Institute, author and degreed laboratory technologist Joyce Smith confirms that "Children exposed to a pet dog before their 13th birthday were significantly less likely (up to 24%) to be diagnosed with schizophrenia -- while children who had a household pet dog at birth or who were first exposed after birth but before age 3 were most protected" (Smith). Not only have children with pets demonstrated a lower risk for schizophrenia, they have also indicated lower levels of general anxiety. For example, a systematic review of scientific evidence published by MDPI states that "Having a pet dog was associated with a decreased likelihood of

general anxiety (12% of children with dogs met the clinical cut-off value for anxiety compared with 21% children without dogs)” (Purewal). These numbers, sourced from an analysis of multiple studies done on the correlation of pet ownership and mental health, demonstrate the benefits of the unique attachment between pet and owner. The sense of joy, comfort, and safety brought by any pet leads to this reduction in anxiety.

In relation to mental health, the process of pet ownership teaches children about the circle of life and the concept of death. According to an excerpt published by Kids Health, titled “When A Pet Dies”, “While it's impossible to shelter kids from the loss of a pet, you can help them cope with it.” While the death of a pet is inevitable and sorrowful, it has beneficial side effects. As mentioned in an article by psychologist Juli Fraga, informing a child of a pet’s death “lets a child know that it is not taboo to talk about death or painful feelings, which can set the stage to process other sorts of loss in the future” (The New York Times). As suggested by Dr. Fraga, working through the loss of a pet will prepare a child for other inevitable losses they will experience in the following years. By teaching these crucial life lessons, pets positively impact the happiness and mental stability of children throughout life.

As caring for a pet encourages the development of personality and mental health, it simultaneously teaches a child important life skills, since taking care of a pet requires a certain level of responsibility. Pets must have food, water, exercise, attention, and a clean facility to go about their lives. Due to these factors, they take up a great deal of time, resources, and energy. As a result, pet management calls for the growth of responsibility. Children eventually develop a routine for carrying out the tasks required to maintain their pet’s comfort, ensuring both time-management and resource-management skills. Author and family therapist Jeff Hamilton elaborates on this in an article published by Psychology Today, stating that because “pets require a schedule” they “can teach a child with ADHD to schedule and plan ahead” (Hamilton). While the cultivation of time-management skills is advantageous to the average child, those struggling from setbacks caused by behavioural disorders such as ADHD will benefit even more.

On the other hand, some may point out that the gift of a pet to a child does not guarantee the child will take care of the pet. In some situations, the parents end up taking responsibility for the pets, rather than the kids doing so. If this is the case, in which the parents are dissatisfied with their children’s behaviour, the parents should step in, correct the behaviour, and utilize the situation as a learning experience. If this is not done correctly, children may develop a sense of failure or shame. This may result in children experiencing confusion or low self-esteem. If this issue is not acknowledged, it may alternatively lead the children to believe it is okay not to do their share of work, resulting in the development of a negative outlook towards responsibility. This issue is discussed in an article published by Scouting Magazine, the publication company of the Boy Scouts of America. It advises parents that “A family that's already burdened by other obligations...will have difficulty taking on the stress of teaching a child to care for a pet” (Wallace). In other words, if parents are not ready to train their children in the art of caretaking, then a pet should not be added to the household. Considering these factors, it is imperative that all elements are taken into consideration before adoption in order to prevent conflict between family members, improper treatment of pets, and mixed-messages delivered to children.

Amongst lessons, pets also teach important social and communication skills. As published in an article from Eastern Florida State College, “Being able to correctly read nonverbal behaviour enhances communication in all interpersonal settings, from home to work. Teaching children to

stay alert, and respond appropriately to a pet's nonverbal behaviour develops observation skills" (Stephens). Over time, the empathy and compassion a child develops for a pet enables the growth of social skills as the child learns to respond to the pet's needs. This gain in social intelligence will prove valuable later in life in settings such as school or the workplace, facilitating the improvement of friendships and partnerships. High-functioning social skills are imperative for success and will overall benefit a child in the following years.

An often unconsidered benefit of pet ownership is the improvement of one's physical health. This is especially relevant for growing children since the experiences one has as a child directly impact the quality of life as an adult. For instance, Michigan State University found that "children who live in homes with a dog can possibly have fewer ear infections and respiratory tract infections and require fewer antibiotics, perhaps because the exposure to animals at a young age stimulates the immune system" (Trautner). Developing a strong immune system sets a child up for good health throughout their life; their sicknesses may not last as long, be as severe, or may even occur less. In addition, children who grow up with pets are more likely to be physically active because many animals require playful attention or time outside. Being physically active is very important for children, as they are still growing and developing. In fact, the Center for Disease Control recommends that children get around sixty minutes of physical activity per day, in order to keep their bones and muscles strong (CDC). Horses are a prime example of a pet that encourages physical activity. A key finding in a study carried out by the University of Brighton stated that "More than two thirds (68 per cent) of questionnaire respondents participate in horse riding and associated activities for 30 minutes or more at least three times a week. Sport England estimates that such a level of sporting activity will help an individual achieve or exceed the government's recommended minimum level of physical activity" (Church). Horse-back riding stimulates core and leg muscles. Alongside that, owning a horse comes with plenty of upkeep that involves the whole body; for example, the heavy lifting of saddles and equipment. Horses are just one example of a pet that encourages exercise; many different species of animals provide great physical benefits to humans, leading to better health.

While sixty-seven per cent of households in the United States own pets, not everyone can afford the constant upkeep that comes with adopting a pet (Insurance Information Institute). According to the American Kennel Club, the nation's oldest and largest non-profit purebred dog registry, the average dog may cost a family up to a whopping 15,782 dollars throughout their expected lifetime. While different breeds and sizes of dogs have differences in lifetime costs, all require the same general expenses. These expenses include adoption fees, routine vet visits, vaccinations, licensing, grooming, food, and toys. Dogs are not the only animals whose costs add up over time. Horses, with an average domestic lifespan of 36 years, have a median cost of 3,876 dollars annually (University Of Maine). Considering these fees, and the fact that some families do not even have sufficient funds to care for their children, it is important for parents to consider all aspects of cost before welcoming a pet into the family to ensure the animal is given the best care possible.

In the same vein as affordability, some proclaim the benefits gained from pet ownership may not derive from the pets at all, but from the socio-economic level required to support both pets and children. As reported by Hal Herzog, Ph.D in an article questioning whether or not pets are beneficial, "...the analysis showed that kids with pets are better off — but not because they have companion animals. It's because they are likely to come from more prosperous homes and not to be members of minority groups" (Psychology Today). Several of the attributes discussed by

Herzog, i.e. better health, can be explained by the desirable socio economic condition of the families studied; on the other hand, this can also be explained by the stimulation of the immune system or encouragement of physical activity induced by pet ownership. In short, whether or not these benefits come from pets or socioeconomic conditions depends on perspective.

Nonetheless, while pets require a generous investment and involve a substantial amount of responsibility, the experiences they bring children leave an astronomical impact that will last a lifetime. Overall, through encouraging empathy and compassion, pets ameliorate mental stability; through improving time management and physical activity; they encourage healthy habits, and through building relationships they enhance social skills. As said by French poet Anatole France, “Until one has loved an animal, a part of one’s soul remains unawakened” (France). In the end, loving a pet as a child is worth suffering the meagre negatives because, as Anatole suggests, the priceless experience it provides will last a lifetime.