

The benefits of living in the company of animals

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between people and animals. Particular emphasis is placed on the tangible benefits to the physical and mental wellbeing of pet owners which have been confirmed by scientific research conducted over the past decade. Some of the current theories as to how these benefits may be achieved are examined, and there is a description of a variety of situations where these positive benefits can be used in therapeutic programs to enrich the lives of people with particular needs. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for local governments of the benefits of animal companionship with respect to both supporting ordinary pet owners and assisting citizens with special needs.

INTRODUCTION

There's more to it than we used to think. Most Australians (80%) have grown up in the company of animals, whether it was stray kittens or pedigree dogs, rare fish or everyday budgies, farm animals or wildlife. More than 60% of Australian households have a pet dog, or cat, or both. In fact, our association with animals is so common that we have tended to take it for granted, and it is only in the past few years that we have started to look more closely at this relationship.

In the past there have been many anecdotal reports of the value of this association. There is now a growing body of scientific evidence documenting the profound effects that relationships with animals have on our mental and physical well being, and the beginnings of an understanding of how these effects are generated. As a result of these findings there is a recognition of the benefits of pet ownership for all, as well as an expanding range of special situations where the presence of an animal may be used to enrich people's lives. Whilst local governments have to address the very real problems caused by a minority of irresponsible animal owners, they should appreciate the advantages of pet ownership and encourage it in their communities.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS OF PET OWNERSHIP

Living in the company of animals contributes to the emotional and psychological health of pet owners. Pets provide an outlet for emotion and energy, and give structure and meaning to the lives of children, the old and the disadvantaged. Pets encourage social activity and remind us of the realities of life.

In an evolutionary context, interaction with animals has been fundamental to the human experience. We use animals as a metaphor for the human condition - it is no coincidence that in all cultures the central characters in their myths and legends, and in the dreams and stories of their children are animals. We ascribe animal characteristics to politicians and popular figures. Clearly, in spite of our apparent civilisation, we still have a deep attachment to animals.

The most common reason given for pet ownership is companionship, and it seems that the psychological benefits come from this relationship itself. Whilst most of us have shared in and value this experience, we have little understanding of precisely how this interaction affects people's wellbeing. We do know that a nurturing relationship with an animal has an ability to reach intimate parts of the individual and to help fulfil emotional needs, particularly in those cases where age, health, physical or mental factors inhibit the development of more complex human relationships. It may well be that the health benefits detailed below flow from the same source, i.e. from the relationship increasing mental wellbeing. Certainly, the reverse has been proven, with many studies showing that people who feel lonely, isolated or depressed are more likely to succumb to illness than people who claim to be contented.

Animals facilitate human interactions and communication, which in turn can have profound psychological benefits. Many years ago, research by a British zoologist Peter Messent showed that a person walking a dog was five times more likely to be engaged in conversation than someone walking alone.

In the late 1960s, Boris Levinson, an American psychotherapist, found that severely withdrawn children who were afraid to communicate with adults got on well with his dog Jingles. By carefully entering the child-dog relationship, Levinson was able to facilitate therapy with these disturbed children.

Pets provide structure and meaning to people's lives. This is especially so for the elderly and those who live alone, who find that once again they have someone to care for each day. This helps to bring order to their lives and in return they receive unconditional affection from their pets.

A pet provides an outlet for energy and emotion within a family, and teaches care and responsibility to the young. Growing up with pets exposes children to situations such as birth and death, intense joy and grief, that they might not otherwise experience in our society, and can help them to come to terms with deeper questions such as the meaning of life and our place in the scheme of things.

PHYSICAL BENEFITS - EFFECTS ON HEALTH

There are many anecdotal reports describing the benefits of the bond between humans and companion animals. However, despite the long history of this association between people and other members of the animal kingdom, it is only in recent years that this interaction has been the subject of serious scientific investigation. The results of this research demonstrate that there are measurable health benefits attributable to animal companionship, particularly in regard to cardiovascular health, stress reduction and coping with the demands of everyday life.

In 1991, researchers at the University of Cambridge discovered that just months after acquiring a cat or a dog, Britons suffered less from perennial health problems such as headache, backache and flu. In 1992, James Serpell at the University of Pennsylvania showed that getting a pet can improve an ordinary person's general health.

There have been several significant findings related to cardiovascular health benefits. In the early eighties Erica Friedmann discovered, by chance and to her surprise, that owning a pet was associated with faster recovery and longer survival time following a heart attack. Aaron Katcher, and also Friedmann, showed that when a person strokes their pet, or even just views a videotape of tropical fish in an aquarium, or sits in the presence of a friendly dog, they experience a fall in blood pressure that is greater than that observed in someone who simply engages in relaxation.

In a recent study at the Baker Medical Research Institute in Melbourne, Warwick Anderson found that pet ownership was associated with significantly lower cardiac disease risk factors - lower cholesterol and triglyceride levels, and lower blood pressure. As with Friedmann's findings, intensive investigation has been unable to attribute these positive benefits to any factors other than pet ownership. If a new drug was discovered that provided the same reduction in risk of heart disease, it would be hailed as a breakthrough.

An obvious health benefit for dog owners is that they are more likely to be involved in exercise than non-owners. It has been found that owning a pet helps to keep elderly people active and thus fitter and healthier, improving the quality of their lives in the process. Pet ownership in general has been shown to reduce stress and help people cope better with the pressures of everyday life.

HOW ARE THESE BENEFITS ACHIEVED?

Whilst there are some obvious benefits such as exercise related to pet ownership, it seems that the most profound benefits stem from the human-animal relationship itself, and in the subtle links between physical and mental wellbeing.

It has been well known for some time that people are more likely to recover from illness or cope with life traumas if they have the support of family and friends. Pets have the ability to provide a special kind of emotional support which is often lacking in relationships between people. This friendship helps to reduce stress and feelings of depression, loneliness and isolation.

As Serpell points out, the unconditional affection given by pets engenders feelings of being admired, respected and wanted. This in turn boosts confidence, self-esteem, ability to cope with the stresses of life and ultimately, our physical health.

Another school of thought is that by living with animals the human species is re-establishing its relationship with the natural world, and the benefits ultimately flow from removing an artificial separation and alienation.

There are many groups doing excellent work in the community. Animals assist people through formal programs such as Guide Dogs, Horse riding for the Disabled, hearing Dogs for the Deaf and companions for the sick and elderly.

Pet facilitated therapy programs have been used successfully with children who are disabled or emotionally unstable, prisoners, physically handicapped adults, patients in mental institutions, and the aged and infirm in extended care facilities. These schemes encompass a wide range of animal species, and a variety of programs including having animals in residence, taking care of and training animals, having visits from volunteers and their animals, and arranging visits from the patients' own pets.

The many benefits of pet ownership listed above have been utilised in programs for the elderly, with much research being carried out in this field. A recent American study found that the presence of a therapy dog significantly increased the efforts made to communicate with others by severely affected Alzheimer's disease patients.

The fact that children are particularly responsive to the presence of animals has been used in many different programs. Pets provide a strong supportive role in the confused world of abused children. It has also been shown that pets can increase the attention span of children with learning difficulties. The therapeutic benefits of companion animals have been studied in a London children's hospital, where it was found that regular visits by the animals helped children overcome the depression brought on by long term hospitalisation and unpleasant hospital treatments.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS OF THE BENEFITS OF PET OWNERSHIP

Local governments should be aware that most of their clients (i.e. ratepayers and welfare recipients) are pet owners who receive significant benefits from animal companionship. As such, authorities should encourage and facilitate responsible pet ownership. This includes supporting existing pet owners when necessary. For example, there is an emerging appreciation that, because of the benefits of animal companionship, home based support of citizens with special needs (such as the aged infirm) should include support of their pet ownership. In addition, there are many special groups in the community who will benefit from living in the company of animals.

We forget that there are many people who, for a variety of reasons, are unlikely to have contact with animals. Paradoxically, people often seem to be deprived of their pets just when they need them most. Many institutions are reluctant to allow pets access to their residents or patients. Schools and homes for disadvantaged, disabled or emotionally disturbed children have been slow to recognise the value of animals. Extended care facilities, the last home for many people, rarely had pets prior to this decade. Those people who have the most to benefit from pets, elderly people, sick or young, should have the right to pet ownership or at least to have regular contact with companion animals. Local government has a role to play here through regulatory and other support.

CONCLUSION

Having a relationship with an animal is not an extravagance, a perversion or a result of displaced parental instinct. Most pet owners are normal rational people who include relationships with animals to augment their existing social relationships. It enriches their lives, making them happier and healthier.

Recent research findings reveal an increasing list of measurable mental and physical benefits that flow from living in the company of animals. It is critical that local governments do not lose sight of the tangible benefits of pet ownership when dealing with animal control issues, but rather facilitate and encourage animal companionship for the benefit of their citizens and their communities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dr Edward Donelan is a veterinary practitioner in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, where for the past twenty years he has been providing quality care for pets and their human companions through his clinics in Doncaster and Templestowe. He has a particular interest in the relationship between people and animals. A founding director of the Delta Society in Australia, he has been active in the animal welfare field for more than twenty years through service to local government, the community and his profession. Dr Donelan is currently the President of the Melbourne Metropolitan Practitioners' Branch of the Australian Veterinary Association.

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