

How Pets Help People

The Humane Society of the United States



Many of us enjoy the companionship of pets. In fact, according to a 2008 survey by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 63 percent of American households include pets. These animals don't ask for much—just a short list of basics such as food, shelter, veterinary care, and, of course, our companionship. Pets offer far more in return, teaching us about love, improving our emotional and physical health, and providing us with unconditional affection and friendship.

Pets Make Good Teachers

Companion animals are natural teachers. They help people of all ages learn about responsibility, loyalty, empathy, sharing, and unconditional love—qualities particularly essential to a child's healthy development. Through helping to care for a pet, children also learn to care for their fellow human beings. There is an established link between how people treat animals and how they treat each other. Kindness to animals is a lesson that benefits people, too.

Pets Can Be Therapists

Given the right animal, people, and circumstances, pets can indeed serve as "therapists." In animal-assisted therapy programs, a companion animal may visit with hospital or nursing home patients. For the program to be safe and effective the animal must be carefully screened and the pet's caregiver must be trained to guide the animal-human interactions. When a specific therapy is desired, a credentialed professional should monitor the program. Even in less formal animal-assisted activities, where the animal is introduced to an individual or group with no specific therapeutic goal, patients and staff often experience improved morale and communication.

Pets Can Serve as Helpers

Specially trained assistance dogs provide people who have physical and mental disabilities with the profound gift of independence. Assistance dogs are not classified as pets under the law, and they are allowed in public places where pets are prohibited. These dogs serve as the hands, ears, or eyes of their human partners and assist them by performing everyday tasks that would otherwise be difficult or impossible. Dogs may also detect changes in behavior, body language, or odor that precede seizures in their human partners, alerting them so that they may seek a safe environment.

Pets Can Be Healers

Pets are good for our emotional and physical health. Caring for a companion animal can provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment and lessen feelings of loneliness and isolation in all age groups. It's well known that relaxed, happy people do not become ill as often as those who suffer from stress and depression. Animal companionship also helps lower a person's blood pressure and cholesterol levels. And studies show that having a dog increases survival rates in groups of patients who have suffered cardiac arrest. Dog walking, pet grooming, and even petting provide increased physical activity that strengthens the heart, improves blood circulation, and slows the loss of bone tissue. Put simply, pets aren't just good friends, they are good medicine.

Can Pets Benefit the Elderly?

Because many Americans are living longer lives these days, sometimes elderly people find themselves living alone because they have outlived loved ones, or because they live far from any family. There is a way, however, for the elderly to find new meaning in their lives, and to redefine what it means to be "young at heart"—by adopting a companion animal from a local shelter. We already know that the many physical benefits pets confer onto people work for all ages, whether you're eight or eighty. If you're older, a pet can offer you a sense of well being, a sense of encouragement, and even a reason for living. Being responsible for another life can add new meaning to your own life, and having to care for and provide a loving home to a companion animal can also help you remain active and healthy.

You may want to consider adopting an older animal, however, rather than a puppy or kitten or a rambunctious "teenage" pet. Older pets are more likely to be calm, already housetrained, and less susceptible to unpredictable behavior. Older animals are often more easily physically managed by elderly persons than stronger, excitable younger animals; yet older pets still confer the same medical and emotional benefits on their owners as younger animals do. Animal shelter staff can help potential adopters find the most suitable animal for their lifestyle, ensuring a great match between pet and person.