

# Dogs Are Tops, but These Other Pets Are Super Anxiety-Busters, Too

Pets are ideal for providing anxiety and stress relief and bolstering mental health in general. While most people think of dogs first, if one doesn't suit your family's lifestyle, these other lower maintenance pets can provide comfort and soothing relief as well.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- From children needing a boost in self-esteem to those undergoing treatment for cancer, dogs may play a beneficial role
- Only 12% of children with dogs suffered from probable anxiety compared to 21% of those without
- Dog ownership was associated with a 9% reduction in the probability of anxiety as measured by an anxiety screening test
- Children who take part in animal-assisted therapy (AAT) with dogs experience improvements in mental health via a reduction in anxiety and enhancing attachment
- Guinea pigs have also proven to be helpful, including among children with autism, who often have high levels of anxiety and stress (arousal) in social situations

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published May 27, 2016.***

Comedian Robert Benchley famously stated, "Every boy should have two things: a dog and a mother who lets him have one." Of course, this needn't be restricted to boys, as there's reason to believe most children — boys and girls alike — may benefit from owning a pet, particularly a dog.

The health benefits of pet ownership for adults are well-established. Dog owners tend to be more physically active than non-owners, for starters. Dogs also act as natural icebreakers, helping to break down walls of social isolation that could otherwise lead to depression and other issues.

There's even evidence dog ownership may positively influence health conditions like high blood pressure while improving survival rates after a heart attack. With all of these noted benefits, it would seem probable that children, too, would have much to gain from owning a pet, but the research on this is slim.

This prompted researchers from the Bassett Medical Center of Cooperstown, New York to conduct a proper study looking into pets and children's health, and in particular whether they help with prevention of chronic disease.

## Children with Dogs Are Less Likely to Suffer from Anxiety

The study involved 643 children with a mean age of 6.7 years. While no relationship was found between pet ownership and body mass index (BMI, a measure of healthy weight), screen time of two hours or less or physical activity, there was an association with anxiety.

Compared to children without dogs, a lower percentage of children with dogs met the clinical cut-off value of Screen for Child Anxiety and Related Disorders (SCARED-5, a test used to screen for childhood anxiety disorders).

Specifically, only 12% of children with dogs suffered from probable anxiety compared to 21% of those without.<sup>1</sup>

The study found "pet dog ownership was associated with a 9% reduction in the probability of a SCARED-5 score of three or higher," which is the point at which further assessment is recommended to diagnose anxiety.

## How Might Dogs Reduce Childhood Anxiety?

It's not surprising that having a dog around may help lower children's risk of anxiety. It's already known, for instance, that children who take part in **animal-assisted therapy** (AAT) with dogs experience improvements in mental health and developmental disorders via a reduction in anxiety and enhancing attachment.

Further, dogs are very responsive to human communicative cues, making them uniquely suited to bolster a child's emerging self-esteem and confidence.

In fact, children aged 7 to 8 rated pets higher than humans when it came to providing a sense of comfort and self-esteem or acting as a confidant, the researchers noted.<sup>2</sup> As for how dogs might reduce childhood anxiety, it's likely via multiple mechanisms. According to the featured study:<sup>3</sup>

*"Pet dogs could reduce childhood anxiety, particularly social and separation anxiety, by various mechanisms. A pet dog can stimulate conversation, an ice-breaking effect that can alleviate social anxiety via a social catalyst effect.*

*Companionship with a pet can alleviate separation anxiety and strengthen attachment. Social interaction of humans and dogs may also lead to increased oxytocin levels in both the human and the dog.*

*Interacting with a friendly dog also reduces cortisol levels most likely through oxytocin release, which attenuates physiologic responses to stress. These hormonal effects may underlie the observed emotional and behavioral benefits of AAT and pet dogs."*

## Dogs May Have a Positive Affect on Anxiety from Many Causes

From children needing a boost in self-esteem to those undergoing treatment for cancer, dogs may play a beneficial role.

Researchers from Mount Sinai Beth Israel Hospital in New York found that cancer patients had improved emotional well-being and quality of life when they spent time with a therapy dog during chemotherapy and radiation treatment.<sup>4,5</sup>

In addition to lowering anxiety and stress levels, patients reported the therapy dogs provided a distraction to the treatment and helped diminish feelings of pain.

Again at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, which has embraced canine therapy since 2007, patients reported lessened anxiety and distress when interacting with the therapy dogs.

Therapy dogs can even be useful for teens facing test anxiety. The Downers Grove Public Library in Illinois brought in pet therapy dogs to assist high school students preparing for final exams.

Universities including Yale, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Connecticut have also used therapy dogs for students cramming for tests.<sup>6</sup>

## **Therapy Dogs Even Reduce the Need for Antianxiety Drugs**

Therapy dogs have also emerged as a promising form of support for people, particularly veterans, with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Although this is more common in adults than children, it still speaks volumes about how beneficial dogs can be for mental health, as the dogs help to restore veterans' sense of responsibility, optimism and self-awareness.

In fact, caring for a dog may even reduce PTSD sufferers' need for antianxiety medications — so it stands to reason that such an activity could help an anxious child as well.

Because AAT is easier to study than routine pet exposure at home, it remains to be seen — at least scientifically speaking — whether pet dogs have direct effects on children's mental health.

However, as the featured study noted, "children spend more time with pets at home than they would with AAT animals," so there's a good possibility a positive effect would be seen.

## **Not Ready for a Dog? Guinea Pigs May Help Too**

While dogs may seem like the natural choice for providing anxiety relief and companionship to children, they're not the only pets that can do so. Guinea pigs have also proven to be helpful, including among children with autism, who often have high levels of anxiety and stress (arousal) in social situations.

When children with autism interacted with guinea pigs, their arousal levels declined, even in the midst of a social situation at school. The study suggests the guinea pigs had a calming, stress-lowering effect in children with autism.<sup>7</sup> You know your child best and can gauge what type of pet may be best for him or her. Even a fish tank can have a calming effect on many people, kids included.

If you're considering adding a pet to your home and your child is under 5, you can assume that you'll be doing most of the pet care. Even children under 10 should not be expected to care for a dog or cat completely on their own.

That being said, growing up with a pet can have immeasurable benefits to your child, even beyond anxiety. Past research has shown, for example, that dog ownership is associated with a lower likelihood of overweight and obesity among children aged 5 to 12 years.<sup>8</sup> It may even help your kids do better in school. There are other benefits, too, as

Benchley so eloquently articulated:

*"A dog teaches a boy fidelity, perseverance, and to turn around three times before lying down."*

Sources and References

<sup>1, 2, 3, 8</sup> [Prev Chronic Dis. 2015 Nov 25;12:E205](#)

<sup>4</sup> [CBS News March 4, 2015](#).

<sup>5</sup> [J Community Support Oncol. 2015 Jan;13\(1\):22-6](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Daily Herald January 15, 2013](#).

<sup>7</sup> [Dev Psychobiol. 2015 Jul;57\(5\):584-95](#).

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