



# Sharing the Love

## Dogs benefit children in more ways than one

Growing up with dogs has many benefits for children, particularly those with special needs. **Caroline Zambrano speaks to Dogs NSW members** to find out how their dogs have enriched and improved the lives of children with difficulties.





FEATURE



## Dogs benefit children in more ways than one

*Caroline Zambrano reports*

Dogs are an important part of the family and for good reason. Besides providing unconditional love, canines improve our quality of life emotionally and physically by decreasing depression, stress and anxiety, as well as lowering blood pressure, improving immunity and even decreasing the risk of heart attack and stroke.

So, it's no surprise that children benefit from growing up with four-legged friends. Pets teach kids about empathy, confidence and responsibility, and support their cognitive language skills. (Dogs can make great listeners and wonderful 'tea party' guests!)

Research shows that reading to dogs may boost reading skills in children and can help with emotional and social skill development<sup>1</sup>. Schools and libraries across the country are experimenting with animal-assisted reading programs.

For a troubled child or young person with autism, a furry friend's non-judgemental, unconditional love and affection can be very therapeutic! In fact, a new study from the University of Liverpool and published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, growing up with a pet can bring social, emotional and educational benefits to children and adolescents<sup>2</sup>.

Funded by the WALTHAM Centre for Pet Nutrition (part of Mars Petcare), research shows youngsters with pets tend to have greater self-esteem, less loneliness and enhanced social skills, adding strength to claims that household pets can help support healthy child development.

"Critical ages for the impact of pet ownership on self-esteem, appear to be greatest for children under 6, and pre-adolescents and adolescents over 10," said Rebecca Purewal, lead author in the study. "Generally, dogs and cats are deemed to be the best providers of social support, perhaps due to a higher level of interaction and reciprocation in comparison to other pets. In both western and non-western cultures pets may act as a form of psychological support, helping youths feel good about themselves and enabling a positive self-image".

### ***Pet Therapy in Schools***

Dogs NSW member Lesley Shirley has seen the positive impact of pets on child development through her work as a pet educator with the NSW Government's Responsible Pet Ownership Education Program, which started in Victoria 16 years ago and is now also running in New South Wales and South Australia.

The purpose of the 'Living Safely With Pets' program is to educate pre-school and primary (K-2) school children and their parents about keeping kids safe around dogs, as well as the responsibilities of pet ownership.



## **Responsible Pet Education Program**

"In the eight years that I have been bringing dogs into classrooms, I have seen the effects of pet therapy on children, particularly with special needs," said Mrs Shirley, a breeder of English Setters for 25 years. "When children meet and touch a dog, the look on their faces shows a sense of achievement. It's a rewarding experience."

Whether Mrs Shirley and her English Setter, 'Gibbs', visit the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children in North Rocks, a primary school's special education unit for kids with an intellectual disability, or a pre-school for children of all abilities, the magic of pet therapy has the same effect on children everywhere.

"Dogs do not differentiate between a child who is deaf, autistic or in a wheelchair. They give all kids unconditional love," she said.

Mrs Shirley recalls a visit to a pre-school where she met a boy with autism.



## *Pet Therapy in homes*

The magic of pet therapy doesn't just happen in schools; it also happens in homes and in the show ring!

Eight year old Dogs NSW Junior Handler, James Collins, has Autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and loves the company of his dogs, Phoenix the Dalmatian, Axl the Whippet and Mack the German Spitz (Mittel). His mother, Anne, said dogs bring the best out in him.

"I like to talk to my dogs," said James. "I call them when I say hello. They come up to me and lick me on the face."

Miss Collins has shown dogs for pleasure for a number of years and said showing dogs has benefited James in many ways. James started Junior Handling over a year ago and has since entered more than a dozen shows, collecting several ribbons. Last year, he got fourth place at the Sydney Royal Dog Show!

"James only has a short amount of time to get to know some of the dogs he brings into the ring, and he shows them really well," she said. "Doing dog shows get us out and amongst other people, helps James meet other kids and builds his social skills."

"The boy was screaming, wanting to come and stand next to me while I spoke to the class about the do's and don'ts around dogs. He stayed with me for two 45-minute presentations, mimicking what I was doing the entire time. He really enjoyed touching the dog," she said. "The boy's teacher said she had never seen him so focused on anything. The boy didn't have a dog at home so the teacher was going to speak to his parents about the benefits of having his own dog."

People don't realise how much dogs bring into their lives, whether the human brain or body is ill, Mrs Shirley explained. At one primary school, Mrs Shirley's dog, Gibbs, met a young boy and did something out of the ordinary.

"The boy put his hand out and Gibbs started to lick his hand. The boy then moved forward to give him a pat," she said. "I later found out the boy had cancer and had come from having chemotherapy. My dog was looking at him like he was the best thing in the world. The boy's mother was in tears. I was in tears."







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## *A natural love between kids and dogs*

Some other kids benefit from dogs differently. Long time Dogs NSW member Miriam O'Callaghan, a breeder of Bullmastiffs for 10 years, and her husband Anthony, a veterinarian, have four children including a teenage son with Down Syndrome.

"Noah is the light of our lives and Down Syndrome has never been in the forefront of him being our son. He is a loving, caring, smart, funny, honest young man," said Mrs O'Callaghan, who started breeding Staffordshire Bull Terriers more than 25 years ago.

Noah was brought up mainly with dogs since he was born and Mrs O'Callaghan remembers their old Staffy, Willow - who wasn't young when Noah was born, nor had she been around little children - would lay under his crib guarding him all day.

"I was amazed where that instinct came from. Every dog we have had since Noah was a baby absolutely adored Noah and would constantly seek him out, always protective of Noah, especially as a baby. There was just a natural love between Noah and the dogs," she said.

"Noah has benefited greatly by loving and being around our dogs. He spent many hours watching, cuddling and playing with the dogs so the benefit is huge in terms of him learning that the animal world and human world are really quite different ... subtle learning skills, but huge meaning and effect behind those skills."

Noah also has a strong affinity with young puppies and helps rear the babies whenever a litter is born.

"Noah is verbal now but his main way of communicating is by touch and the dogs respond to that in an incredible way," said Mrs O'Callaghan. "We have learned that talk is not the most effective communication when being with our dogs, but touch and time put into them is far more rewarding at times."

Dr Anthony O'Callaghan, a veterinarian at Mylonas and O'Callaghan Veterinary Hospital in Blacktown, said dogs also benefit from growing up with children.

"Dogs learn a little extra tolerance and sometimes a seemingly intuitive response to children with special needs," he said. "Children with special needs are not always verbal or develop language much later and it is interesting to watch how dogs, especially in our home, respond and understand things without always listening for verbal cues."





***“Dogs don’t discriminate – just love.  
It’s the most powerful medicine.”***



### ***Some dogs stand out more than others***

Dogs NSW members and Lagotto Romagnolo breeders, Ray and Sandi Sharpe, also found their beloved dogs to be intuitive when it comes to children with special needs. “All of our dogs are special to us but some stand out more than others,” said Mrs Sharpe.

One of their twins, Connor, now 18 years old, has Asperger’s and suffers from Anxiety Disorder and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Connor bonded at a young age with Humphrey, an extremely timid male Lagotto, who came to the family as a mature dog. Mrs Sharpe said Humphrey needed a lot of work to gain his trust and build confidence, not to mention training for the show ring. But he had other ideas.

“Humphrey bonded with Connor. If that kid got sick, he knew before we did and would not leave Connor’s side, not even to go to the toilet,” she said. “He set himself on Connor’s bed and there he would stay until Connor regained his health.”

Humphrey wasn’t the only Lagotto to make a difference in a child’s life. One of the Sharpe’s puppies found a home with an older lady who was caring for a foster child with epilepsy, diabetes and severe autism. Amazingly, eight months into the puppy’s life in his new home, he was alerting the lady whenever the child’s blood sugar levels dropped too low, or was elevated too high, and was also able to detect an oncoming seizure, all of which occurred without any formal training.

Whether at school, at home, or out in the community, our canine companions offer many benefits for children to connect with the world around them. Dogs don’t discriminate – just love. It’s the most powerful medicine.

### **References**

<sup>1</sup> Hall, S., Gee, N., & Mills, D. (2016). Children Reading to Dogs: A Systematic Review of the Literature PLOS ONE, 11 (2) DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0149759

<sup>2</sup> ‘Companion Animals and Child/Adolescent Development: A Systematic Review of the Evidence’. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health [doi:10.3390/ijerph14030234]

### **Photos**

*Page 11 & Page 14 (top): Photos of Noah O’Callaghan, supplied by Miriam O’Callaghan.*

*Page 13 (top left): Photo of Lesley Shirley with ‘Gibbs’, supplied by Lesley Shirley.*

*Page 13 (right): Photo of James Collins and ‘Axl’ at Sydney Royal Dog Show, supplied by Anne Collins.*

*Page 14 (bottom): Photo of James Collins and ‘Axl’*

*Page 15: Photos of Connor Sharpe aged 10 years with ‘Bella’, at Pet Expo 2009. Ffire Photography*

