

A little pet therapy can lift back to school blues!

According to a study in the UK, pet owning children spend significantly more time in class at school than non pet-owning children. This research suggests those back to school blues could be easily cured with a promise of a little animal magic in the classroom. Recognising the benefits pets in the classroom can bring, many charities now run pet programmes for schools¹.

Research in the UK has also shown there is nothing better than the real thing. Contact with a live animal rather than the use of a soft toy, results in children being more attentive and responsive in the presence of the animal to the teacher or therapist in the case of children with special needs².

What are the benefits of a pet programme in schools?

By introducing animals in to schools, a range of moral, spiritual and educational benefits for the child can be observed. Pets in schools have been found to:

- Motivate pupils to learn and think
- Encourage respect for life
- Foster a sense of empathy and responsibility in children
- Teach children how to nurture, care for and love all life
- Lead to the development of hobbies and potential careers in animal care
- Improve academic achievement

Pets can also work miracles for children with special learning needs. For instance, studies have shown that sustained contact with animals in a structured learning programme can increase focused attention in children with ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) as effectively as such medications like Ritalin.

There are a number of exciting programmes running in other countries. In the US for example, Fido has proved an unlikely but highly effective reading partner. Therapy dogs are now often used in programmes where children read to the dog. The dogs appear to listen intently, and unlike humans, do not interrupt or correct the child. Results have shown that the children's reading ability can improve greatly as their confidence grows.

¹ June McNicholas

² Jenny Limond

In Austria, Professor Kurt Kotschral's study demonstrated that contrary to expectations, the presence of dogs in the classroom resulted in a better learning environment. The children became more co-operative, more considerate towards each other. They became more focused and paid closer attention to their teacher.

An Australian study monitored the effect of classroom cats. Their presence calmed the children who became quieter and more co-operative. The cats had a significant impact on children who had previously exhibited serious behaviour problems. Parents, teachers and head teachers were enthusiastic about the programme and children enjoyed school more³.

According to John Foster, Chairman of the Pet Health Council: "Children are universally naturally interested in animals. Parents and teachers can harness this interest to teach children important life skills and lessons. The needs of people and animals are broadly similar. Teaching animal care gives teachers and parents unparalleled opportunity to introduce many important concepts such as good nutrition, health and hygiene routines, a responsible outlook in life and preventative health care".

Elizabeth Ormerod MRCVS, Pet Health Council member, highlights that animal welfare should be a primary consideration at all times: "Any involvement of animals in schools must promote good practice in animal care and welfare. Children can share the tasks of caring for the pet, but an adult needs to take overall responsibility for the pet's welfare. Veterinary Surgeons should also be involved in the selection, assessment, and care of the pets."

The International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO) recognises the need to teach children about animal care and encourages the regulated presence of animals in schools. In 2001 IAHAIO issued the *Rio Declaration on Pets in Schools* which states:

"Given the strong evidence that has accumulated in recent years demonstrating the value, to children and juveniles of social relationships with companion animals, it is important that children be taught proper and safe behaviour towards animals and the correct care, handling and treatment of the various companion animal species."

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For further information, please contact Nicole Harrison or Holly Hunt on 020 7379 6545 or email: enquiries@pethealthcouncil.co.uk

³ "Using cats in elementary school classrooms to modify the attitudes and behaviour of children"
Presented at the 8th International Conference on Human-Animal Interactions, Prague 10-12
September 1998

Notes to editor

The Pet Health Council is a body of pet and human health experts. The aim of the organisation is to promote the health and welfare of animals in the interests of both pets and people. For further information on pet care and the benefits of pet ownership, please visit:

www.pethealthcouncil.co.uk

Further information on the care and welfare of animals in such situations, including a Pet Protocol is available from the Society of Companion Animal Studies (SCAS): www.scas.org.uk

Many charities run pets in schools programme including Pets As Therapy and Blue Cross. Pets As Therapy, a Pet Health Council member, are currently working in 139 mainstream schools and 135 Special Needs Schools throughout the U.K. For further information, please visit:

<http://www.petsastherapy.org/>

Resources for teachers:

Animals in Schools – published by The Society for Companion Animal Studies (SCAS) a teacher's guide to the educational and therapeutic benefits. www.scas.org.uk

The Blue Cross – educational resources and visits by volunteers with accredited visiting dogs: www.bluecross.org.uk

Caring for Cats and Dogs a publication by the World Society for Protection of Animals (WSPA). This also includes information about introducing animals to schools.

Other organisations include: Cats Protection, Dogs Trust, Scottish SPCA, Ulster SPCA, Woodgreen Animal Shelters