

Dog Therapy Lifts Back-to-school Blues, Study Finds

Cats and Dogs in classrooms are found to boost academic achievement in U.K.

Posted: August 5, 2008, 5 a.m. EDT

Hitting the books may be something children can start to look forward to at schools with pet programs in place, according to a study done in the United Kingdom.

Contact with a live animal in the classroom, such as a cat or dog, results in children being more attentive and responsive to the teacher – or to the therapist in the case of children with special needs, research has shown. Additionally, pet-owning children spend significantly more time in class at school than non pet-owning children, according to the study.

By introducing animals into schools, a range of educational benefits for the child can be observed. According to the U.K. study, pets in schools have shown to:

Motivate students 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, and

Improve academic achievement.

An example of dogs' effect on learning is found right here in the United States, where they have proven to be effective reading partners for children. Trained therapy dogs are often used in programs where children read to the dog. The dogs appear to listen intently and in a nonjudgmental way. As a result, the children's reading skills can improve as their confidence builds.

A separate study of 37 elementary urban and rural schools in Australia monitored the effect of classroom cats and found that their presence calmed the children and increased class cohesiveness and the general classroom atmosphere. The cats had a significant impact on children who had previously shown serious behavior problems, according to the study on human-animal interaction.

Cats' and dogs' presence in the classroom has demonstrated that pets generate a relaxed environment. John Foster, chairman of the Pet Health Council, which promotes the health and welfare of animals in the interest of pets and people, said, "Children are universally naturally interested in animals. Parents and teachers can harness this interest to teach children important life skills and lessons."