

Dogs as Man's Best Friends

Who is a good listener, stress reliever, and empty-nest filler all in one furry package? Your dog.

Susan McCullough

Life in my household is pretty stressful this year. My 18-year-old daughter Julie, a high school senior, is coping with the stresses of college entrance exams, college visits, and college applications. Added to those pressures are a ton of schoolwork, the usual extracurricular activities, and a part-time job. Sometimes things get pretty volatile around our house, even though my husband Stan and I try to minimize the stress on her and on ourselves.

But the fourth member of our family — our 4-year-old Golden Retriever Allie — seems to do a better job of stress reduction than either Stan or I do. When our house turns into Tension City, Allie shuttles back and forth among us, nudging our hands for a pat or placing a paw on someone's knee. If those measures fail to dial back the drama, Allie takes her therapeutic efforts to the next level: She drops a tennis ball at someone's feet.

Social scientists know that Allie isn't the only dog who performs family therapy or other functions that improve family life. Here are some other ways experts say dogs make family life better.

Relieving tension. "When my colleagues and I investigated the importance of pets in the childhoods of sexual abuse survivors, we found that pets in many cases were rated as the most supportive being in their childhoods," says psychologist Sandra Barker, Ph.D., director of the Center for Human-Animal Interaction at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. "So at times when family members are physically or emotionally hurting, or are under stress, dogs may be a special source of non-threatening comfort and support."

Being good listeners. "Often family members and friends offer advice when what we really need is someone who will objectively listen and just be there while we pour our hearts out," Barker says. "Dogs naturally do that and seem to enjoy having their owners talk to them."

Teaching nurturing skills. A dog or other pet can give children the opportunity to learn how to nurture or care for another dependent being — in the case of boys, perhaps the only opportunity that's acceptable to them. In her book, *Why the Wild Things Are: Animals in the Lives of Children* (Harvard University Press, 2001), psychologist Gail Melson, Ph.D., of Purdue University notes that "caring for pets is the only outlet for nurturing others that is ubiquitously available for most boys in their homes and does not reflect a suspected diminution of masculine behavior. This makes pet care a potential training ground for learning how to nurture another being."

I suspect that in a few months I'll discover another way that dogs benefit families: the filling of empty nests. As stressful as life in our house sometimes gets these days despite Allie's efforts, I know that the place will seem awfully quiet after Julie departs for college. Fortunately, Allie will still be here, and I'm sure she won't mind when I lavish all my mothering impulses on her.

Award-winning writer Susan McCullough lives with her husband, daughter, and dog in Virginia.