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Dog Ownership Benefits Children with Autism

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*Submitted by
Dee Loflin, SMT Manager/Writer*

Columbia, Missouri - Many families face the decision of whether to get a dog. For families of children with autism, the decision can be even more challenging. Now, a University of Missouri researcher has studied dog ownership decisions in families of children with autism and found, regardless of whether they owned dogs, the parents reported the benefits of dog ownership included companionship, stress relief and opportunities for their children to learn responsibility.

“Children with autism spectrum disorders often struggle with interacting with others, which can make it difficult for them to form friendships,” said Gretchen Carlisle, a research fellow at the Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction (ReCHAI) in the MU College of Veterinary Medicine. “Children with autism may especially benefit from interacting with dogs, which can provide unconditional, nonjudgmental love and companionship to the children.”

Carlisle interviewed 70 parents of children with autism. Nearly two-thirds of the parents in the study owned dogs, and of those parents, 94 percent reported their children with autism were bonded to their dogs. Even in families without dogs, 70 percent of parents said their children with autism liked dogs. Many dog-owning parents said they specifically chose to get dogs because of the perceived benefits to their children with autism, Carlisle said.

“Dogs can help children with autism by acting as a social lubricant,” Carlisle said. “For example, children with autism may find it difficult to interact with other neighborhood children. If the children with autism invite their peers to play with their dogs, then the dogs can serve as bridges that help the children with autism communicate with their peers.”

Parents of children with autism should consider their children’s sensitivities carefully when choosing a dog in order to ensure a good match between pet and child, Carlisle said.

“Bringing a dog into any family is a big step, but for families of children with autism, getting a dog should be a decision that’s taken very seriously,” Carlisle said. “If a child with autism is sensitive to loud noises, choosing a dog that is likely to bark will not provide the best match for the child and the family. If the child has touch sensitivities, perhaps a dog with a softer coat, such as a poodle, would be better than a dog with a wiry or rough coat, such as a terrier.”

Carlisle recommends parents involve their children with autism when choosing a dog.

“Many children with autism know the qualities they want in a dog,” Carlisle said. “If parents could involve their kids in choosing dogs for their families, it may be more likely the children will have positive experiences with the animals when they are brought home.”

Although her study only addressed dog ownership among families affected by autism, Carlisle said dogs might not be the best pet for every child with autism.

“If you know one child with autism, you know one child with autism,” Carlisle said. “Dogs may be best for some families, although other pets such as cats, horses or rabbits might be better suited to other children with autism and their particular sensitivities and interests.”

“This research adds scientific credibility to the benefits of human-animal interaction,” said Rebecca Johnson, a professor at the MU College of

Veterinary Medicine, director of ReCHAI, and the Millsap Professor of Gerontological Nursing in the MU Sinclair School of Nursing. “This research helps us understand the impact of pet ownership on the lives of children with autism and how to best guide families in choosing

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The study, “Pet Dog Ownership Decisions for Parents of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder,” was published in the Journal of Pediatric Nursing earlier this year.

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