

MEDIA RELEASE

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Pets – teaching children new tricks

With more than half of Australia's households enjoying the companionship of a pet, many parents may already have discovered that their dog or cat is more than just a furry friend, it is teaching their children some important behaviours.

International research has shown that taking responsibility for the well-being of a pet helps children to treat people and other animals well.

Now, new Australian research, by Dr Kelly Thompson and Professor Eleonora Gullone from the Department of Psychology at Monash University, shows that children with a well developed sense of empathy and attachment behave better towards other people and animals.

"Empathy towards others is one of the important characteristics of a healthy emotional state. Children that are involved in looking after pets gain a sense of responsibility and an understanding of what it takes to care for an animal and this helps them to treat others around them with the same sense of care," says Susie Willis from the Petcare Information and Advisory Service.

"Having just brought a new puppy into our family, I can see the pleasure our children are getting from taking part in her care," Ms Willis says.

And it seems that in return for this love and care, pets give back just as much pleasure to the families they are part of.

"English research has shown that pets are identified by 95% of children as among the top 10 relationships in their lives, with pets being very important to a child when they are ill or at a troubled time in their lives.

"The researchers believe that this is because children see pets as non-judgmental, so they develop very trusting relationships with them," says Ms Willis.

Children who grow up with pets are also reported as having higher self esteem, exercising more and being less sensitive to allergens later in life.

"The vast majority of adults in Australia today grew up with pets as part of the family and even with the appeal of technology today, 74% of children aged 10 to 12 report that their next favourite activity to playing with their friends is playing with their pets.

"Of course, there are important questions that must be considered before a family decides to get a pet. You will need to think about the amount of time you can put into

caring for a pet, how much exercise, grooming and play time you can give them. You also need to consider the costs of caring for a pet, including the unexpected costs that still need to be planned for.

“There is nothing quite like the relationship a child has with a dog or a cat, for many people it is something they have happy memories of throughout their life,” says Ms Willis.

For assistance in identifying the sort of dog or cat that is suited to your lifestyle, go to www.petnet.com.au and answer the Select-a-Pet questionnaire.

(ENDS)

Issued by the Petcare Information and Advisory Service

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Australia – A Nation of Pet Lovers

Australia is a nation of pet lovers. It is estimated that 63% of Australian households have some type of pet with 53% of households owning a dog or a cat.

Over many years, Australian and international research has shown that owning pets can help improve a person’s mental and physical health, reduce the effects of stress, help children learn about responsibility, facilitate social interaction between people and build a sense of community.

The Petcare Information & Advisory Service (PIAS) is funded by Mars Petcare Australia as part of its commitment to socially responsible pet ownership. PIAS’ websites: www.petnet.com.au and www.i-pet.com.au provide information on the responsible and enjoyable ownership of pets. The sites are suitable for children, although PIAS encourages parents to supervise any online access by their children.