

On Parenting • Perspective

# A new study shows what many of us already believe: Dogs are good for kids

By Galadriel Watson April 11 at 6:34 AM

I like to think I have a great relationship with my children. While I can't brag that my 19 years with my son and 16 years with my daughter have been perfect, I can chalk them up as pretty darn good. Is it because I'm (ahem) a great mother? Or, rather, should I be thanking our family dog?

## Spreading the love

A recent study found that children who feel close to their pet dogs are also more securely attached to their parents and have better bonds with their best friends. Researchers at Kent State University looked at 99 children ages 9 to 11 who owned pet dogs. These children answered questionnaires about their relationships with their dogs, parents and friends.

The study found if one type of relationship was strong, it's likely the others were, too. In general, children with strong bonds with their dogs also had strong bonds with their parents and best friends.

But which came first?

Kathryn Kerns, a psychology professor at Kent State and one of the lead researchers, says they don't know. It could be that caring for pets makes children feel closer to the significant humans in their lives, or it could be that their human relationships model how they should treat their pets. It could also be a reciprocal jumble: A positive experience with the pet leads to being more cooperative with parents, and that positive experience with parents leads to being closer to the pet, and so on.

The researchers also watched how the children interacted with their dogs. They found that those who had more physical contact with their pets had better relationships with their mothers — but not necessarily with their fathers (or friends).

“Given that mothers play a bit more of a role as a safe haven, as the one to go to for comfort, than dad, perhaps that's why we found that effect,” Kerns says. “The close relationship with the mother might be more of a model for closeness with others, including the dog.”

## Increasing Zen with Fido

Kerns and her team also did another study: How do pet dogs affect children's emotions during stressful events?

The same 99 pre-adolescents were asked to deliver a five-minute autobiographical speech. The speech would be watched live by the experimenters, and, to up the stress factor, videotaped to be supposedly evaluated later.

Half the children had their dogs in the room, while half didn't. “Kids who had their dogs present felt much happier throughout the whole process,” Kerns says. And having physical contact with the dog — its chin on the child's lap, or the dog leaning against the child's leg — made the experience even less stressful.

“When people are around pets and petting them, oftentimes they just feel calmer inside,” Kerns explains. The children may be in a better mood around their pets, which helps them cope better with stressors. The child may have had past calming experiences with his or her dog, which now makes it easier to relax.

With a loyal buddy at the child's side, the situation may feel less threatening.

In an unrelated [study](#), children did a similar stress test either with a pet dog, with a parent or alone. The stress level was lowest when the children were with their dogs. Then there is a [study](#) on adults, who performed a stressful task with a pet dog, with a friend or alone. They were least stressed when they had their pet dogs with them. When alone, the stress level went up. And when with a friend, the stress level was highest of all.

Why can dogs offer better support than humans? “Humans can be judgmental in a way that dogs aren't,” Kerns says. While we might worry a friend is silently evaluating our performance, we know a dog couldn't care less.

## Fish need not apply (but teenagers can)

So might other pets have similar effects? Kerns and her team decided to study dogs because they have characteristics distinct from other pets: the ability to read emotions, loyalty and an affinity for physical contact. While other animals that allow for physical contact may offer similar benefits, like cats or even horses, the results probably wouldn't hold up for more distant pets, like a fish.

As for extrapolating the results to children of other ages — like my teens — Kerns says she imagines it would work similarly: “We focused on pre-adolescents because that's a time at which children are especially likely to talk about their pets in terms of them being friends. But I don't know that I would expect it to be so different for older adolescents, for example.”

## A furry, slobbery tool

If you're dog-less, though, don't run out and buy one unless it has been a longtime family goal. The stress of owning a dog — from expenses to daily responsibilities — may not be worth the benefits. “They're not always charming and fun,” Kerns says.

Also, they won't help compensate for a child's poor human relationships. “If your child doesn't have a friend, then get them a dog and that will make up for it: I don't think we found any evidence of that.”

But if you do have a pet dog, take advantage of it. On the drive to the first day at a new school, let your child sit in the back seat of the car with your dog. If you're going to announce a big move, make sure the dog's at the family meeting, too.

It isn't just having a dog that reduces stress: It's having the dog *with* you. Because all the children in Kerns's study had dogs, it wasn't ownership alone that reduced stress. The important factor was the dog's immediate presence.

As for strong relationships, as a mother I like to think my bond with my kids has made them closer to the dog, not the other way around. But it really doesn't matter who gets top billing. What matters in the end is that we're all tightknit.

*Galadriel Watson is a freelance writer from British Columbia, Canada. Her newest nonfiction book for children, on the science behind amazing human abilities, will be published in winter 2019 by Annick Press. Find her online at [www.galadrielwatson.com](http://www.galadrielwatson.com).*

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