

New research findings highlight benefits of human-animal interaction

July 23 2013

Positive results from three new studies on human-animal interaction (HAI) are being presented today at the triennial conference of the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO) in Chicago, IL. The studies, supported by funding from Mars and the WALTHAM Centre for Pet Nutrition (WALTHAM), examined how pets impact our physical and emotional well-being and our social relationships and community connectedness. WALTHAM is the state-of-the-art petcare science centre for Mars Petcare and provides the science and expertise underpinning leading Mars Petcare brands.

"We are seeing a number of critical advances in the field that are expanding our understanding of the benefits of human-animal interaction for human, animal, and community well-being. We are proud to support important research in this area and advance and share knowledge of the positive and lasting effects of pet ownership," said Dr. Sandra McCune, Scientific Leader - Human-Animal Interaction, at WALTHAM®.

As a lead sponsor in this year's conference and long-term supporter of HAI research, WALTHAM® sponsored several studies presented at the IAHAIO conference, including the following:

• Interaction with Horses Boosts Adolescents' Social Skills –A study at Washington State University revealed that interacting with horses improved <u>young adolescents</u>' self-awareness, self-



management, personal responsibility, decision-making, and relationship skills, and provided insights into the interplay between the children's emotional and physiological responses. The study consisted of 64 young teens, aged 10-14 years, who were assigned to either an experimental or control group. Those in the experimental group participated in an 11-week equinefacilitated learning program designed to increase social competence through a series of once-weekly, 90-minute sessions of individual, team, and group-focused equine-facilitated activities. Those in the control group were observed as a comparison, and were offered the learning programme at a later date. Levels of the stress hormone cortisol were collected prior to the programme and throughout the riding session. Using a selfreport survey, the participants' levels of positive and negative emotion were measured immediately before mounting the horse, ten minutes later, and immediately after dismounting. At the end of the session, independent observers rated the teens' positive behaviours, such as following direction and accepting feedback, and negative behaviours, such as being argumentative or hyperactive. Those teens who demonstrated positive behaviour during the first riding session were more likely to see improvements in their social competence over the full 11-week programme period, and those who had produced increased levels of cortisol in response to riding were more likely to report negative emotion and behaviour, suggesting that strategies to regulate participants' physiological responses are needed to maximise the positive effects of equine-facilitated learning programmes. In addition to funding from Mars and WALTHAM®, this study was also supported by funding from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH).

• Dog Interaction May Provide Help for People with Dementia –



New research from the University of Maryland suggests that structured interaction with dogs could be an effective approach for preserving and even enhancing the mental health and physical function of people with dementia. The study involved 40 elderly adults with dementia residing in assisted-living facilities and found a reduction in depression following a pet-assisted living programme involving regular interaction with a dog. The study also indicated a trend for improved physical function as a result of the pet-assisted living programme. Participants in this study had two, 60-90 minute sessions a week for three months in which they were encouraged to interact with the visiting dog. A control group was encouraged to reminisce about their experiences with researchers and other residents in a way that involved both social skills and small motor skills.

 Pet Ownership Improves Social Relationships and Connects Communities – According to new research by the University of Western Australia, <u>pet ownership</u> helps improve social networks and access to social support, with pet owners more likely to get to know new people and make new friends. This international study involved a telephone survey of a random sample of more than 2500 adults from Perth (Australia), San Diego, Portland and Nashville (US). Dog walking was found to be one of the top five ways to meet new people and, overall, more pet owners than nonpet owners got to know new people since moving to their current neighbourhood. Additionally, the research found that people who walk their dog achieved sufficient physical activity on more days a week than people who don't own a dog.

The involvement of Mars Petcare and WALTHAM® in IAHAIO is part of a broader commitment to human-animal interaction research, which also includes major sponsorship of the annual conference hosted by the International Society for Anthrozoology (ISAZ) that took place earlier this week on July 18-19 in Chicago and also featured research by



WALTHAM®, their collaborators and grantees.

More information: www.iahaio.org/

Provided by APCO Worldwide

Citation: New research findings highlight benefits of human-animal interaction (2013, July 23) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <u>https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-07-highlight-benefits-human-animal-interaction.html</u>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.