

Owning a pet dog can help parents of children with autism

May 21 2015, by Marie Daniels



Quinn, an autistic boy, and the line of toys he made before falling asleep. Repeatedly stacking or lining up objects is a behavior commonly associated with autism. Credit: Wikipedia.

A new study has highlighted the potential for pet dogs to reduce stress in parents of children with autism.

A team of psychologists and animal behaviour experts at the University

of Lincoln, UK, in conjunction with charities Dogs for the Disabled and the National Autistic Society, discovered a significant decrease in parental stress in those families who acquired a dog.

With support from the Big Lottery Fund, the researchers have been investigating the benefits a pet dog can bring to families with a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The importance of trained assistance dogs for disabled people and [autism](#) assistance dogs, in improving the quality of life of a range of individuals with specific requirements, is well recognised. However, training these dogs requires substantial time and economical input.

In recognition of this problem charity Dogs for the Disabled developed a series of workshops and aftercare support services known as PAWS to demonstrate to parents and carers of children with autism the benefits that pet dogs may bring to their family.

Professor Daniel Mills presented the research findings, which have been published online in the *Journal of Autism and Development Disorders*, at the Research Autism Lorna Wing Conference, My Family and Autism, in London on Thursday, 21st May.

Professor Daniel Mills, from the School of Life Sciences at the University of Lincoln, said: "These families are often living under great stress, which can bring detrimental impacts to mental and physical health. This study focussed on the potential of pet dogs to alter parenting stress levels. Previous research has suggested that animal-assisted therapy (AAT) can reduce blood pressure and anxiety in a number of individuals. However, AAT typically involves short, structured sessions with a dog, without the additional burden of daily animal care. Given the added responsibility that comes with owning a dog, particularly a puppy, we wanted to assess whether parents living in stressful circumstances

could still benefit from animal companionship, despite the increase in responsibilities and duties."

The researchers used a standardised assessment of parental stress, to measure parents' stress levels before obtaining a dog and at designated periods after that. At the same time periods, and using the same scale, the team measured parenting stress in a control group of parents with a child with autism, who did not acquire a pet dog during this time.

Significant decreases in parenting stress were observed in the families who acquired a dog and a significant number of these parents moved from clinically high levels of parental distress to within the clinically normal range.

Professor Mills added: "The results highlight the potential of pet dogs to improve parenting stress associated with caring for a child with autism. As well as improving quality of life for these parents, reductions in parenting stress could also improve problematic child behaviours, with research from other teams suggesting that levels of [parental stress](#) can determine the success of autism treatments."

Peter Gorbing, Chief Executive of Dogs for the Disabled, said: "As a charity we constantly see the benefits that dogs bring to people's lives, far beyond practical support. Our expertise training assistance dogs led us to believe we could also support families affected by autism with a well-trained pet dog. We have now supported more than 600 who have attended our PAWS workshops. To see evidence that [pet dogs](#) really can assist by lowering the stress of parents of children with autism is a real endorsement of the charity's work. It's also a great example of a low-level intervention – a key element of the UK's national autism strategy - so this is significant encouragement for our plans to expand the PAWS service."

Research Director at Research Autism, Richard Mills, said: "Families of children affected by autism commonly experience persistent and damaging levels of stress. This permeates all aspects of family life with serious consequences for health and wellbeing and on overall coping and quality of life. In exploring low-level, socially appropriate interventions in reducing [parenting stress](#) and promoting wellbeing, this collaborative study has clearly demonstrated the benefit of introducing a well-trained pet dog into the family."

Carol Povey, Director of the National Autistic Society's Centre for Autism, said: "Caring for someone with autism is not always easy, which makes it vital that parents can access a range of different support. For instance, 81% of carers tell us that they developed anxiety due to a lack of support, while 64% said this led to depression. Many parents of children with autism have told us about the benefits of having a family dog, so it's promising to see evidence that this can significantly alleviate their stress levels. But, as the authors recognise, the individual nature of autism means that it's unlikely that dog ownership would benefit all families in the same way. Autism can have a profound impact on families but the right support at the right time can make all the difference."

More information: "Acquiring a Pet Dog Significantly Reduces Stress of Primary Carers for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Prospective Case Control Study" *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* [DOI: 10.1007/s10803-015-2418-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-015-2418-5)

Provided by University of Lincoln

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