

# Pet dogs help kids feel less stressed, study finds

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Credit: University of Florida

Pet dogs provide valuable social support for kids when they're stressed, according to a study by researchers from the University of Florida, who were among the first to document stress-buffering effects of pets for children.

Darlene Kertes and colleagues tested the commonly held belief that pet [dogs](#) provide [social support](#) for kids using a randomized controlled study—the gold standard in research.

"Many people think pet dogs are great for kids but scientists aren't sure if that's true or how it happens," Kertes said. Kertes reasoned that one way this might occur is by helping children cope with stress. "How we learn to deal with stress as children has lifelong consequences for how we cope with stress as adults."

For their study, recently published in the journal *Social Development*, the researchers recruited approximately 100 pet-owning families, who came to their university laboratory with their dogs. To tap children's stress, the children completed a public speaking task and mental arithmetic task, which are known to evoke feelings of stress and raise the [stress hormone cortisol](#), and simulates real-life stress in children's lives. The children were randomly assigned to experience the stressor with their dog present for social support, with their parent present, or with no social support.

"Our research shows that having a pet dog present when a child is undergoing a [stressful experience](#) lowers how much children feel stressed out," Kertes said. "Children who had their pet dog with them reported feeling less stressed compared to having a parent for social support or having no social support."

Samples of saliva was also collected before and after the stressor to check children's [cortisol](#) levels, a biological marker of the body's stress response. Results showed that for kids who underwent the stressful experience with their [pet dogs](#), children's cortisol level varied depending on the nature of the interaction of children and their pets.

"Children who actively solicited their dogs to come and be pet or stroked had lower cortisol levels compared to children who engaged their dogs less," said Kertes, an assistant professor in the psychology department of UF's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. "When dogs hovered around or approached children on their own, however, children's cortisol tended to be higher."

The children in the study were between 7 to 12 years old.

"Middle childhood is a time when [children](#)'s social support figures are expanding beyond their parents, but their emotional and biological capacities to deal with stress are still maturing," Kertes explained. "Because we know that learning to deal with stress in childhood has lifelong consequences for emotional health and well-being, we need to better understand what works to buffer those [stress](#) responses early in life."

Provided by University of Florida

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