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Dogs may ease a child's fears

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Kids with pets in the home were less likely to test positive for anxiety than those without, study found

(HealthDay)—The companionship of a dog may lower a child's anxiety levels, a new study suggests.

The researchers looked at almost 650 children aged 18 months and older who were screened for anxiety. Of those children, 58 percent had a dog at home.

Only 12 percent of children with dogs tested positive for anxiety, compared with 21 percent of those without dogs, the researchers at Bassett Medical Center in Cooperstown, N.Y., found.

The study was published recently in the journal *Preventing Chronic Disease*.

Having a dog may reduce a child's anxiety—particularly social and

separation anxieties—in a number of ways, such as by triggering conversations and helping break the ice with new people, the researchers suggested. However, the study did not prove a cause-and-effect link between dogs and lower anxiety levels in children.

"Interacting with a friendly dog also reduces cortisol levels, most likely through oxytocin release, which lessens physiologic responses to stress," the researchers wrote. "These hormonal effects may underlie the observed emotional and behavioral benefits of animal-assisted therapy and pet dogs."

More information: Children's Mental Health Ontario has more about anxiety.

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