

## Pet Assisted Therapies



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Research shows that having a pet can provide a wide range of health and emotional benefits for babies and children. Most are associated with release of the hormone, oxytocin.

Oxytocin has been called the 'cuddle', 'love' or 'bonding' hormone for its role in facilitating pair-bonding and long-term attachment. Stroking, holding, cuddling or patting an animal releases oxytocin into the bloodstream in the same way that cuddling a familiar adult does, giving rise to feelings of happiness, calm and contentment. As a consequence, the child becomes less anxious and more willing to make friends. The hormone also heightens emotional feelings towards inanimate objects, which is why some people name their cars, cry when they sell their belongings and show generosity towards complete strangers. Similarly, oxytocin orchestrates attachment to a soft toy or special blanket, since it is associated with comfort and warm feelings between the baby and the parent.

Studies show that children with low levels of oxytocin are more vulnerable to emotional and behavioural disorders. Certain learning and memory functions may also be impaired. Close contact with animals however, promotes release of the hormone. In some cases, oxytocin levels increase within minutes of touching or stroking a pet. In early years settings where animals or pets are encouraged, children benefit from improved cognitive and language skills. They also learn about responsibility, kindness, loyalty, sharing and love. All these qualities are essential to their healthy development and well-being.

## Oxytocin

Oxytocin is mainly produced in the hypothalamus, where it is released into the bloodstream and central nervous system by the pituitary gland. Oxytocin release in the brain is stimulated by touch, by pleasant smells and by social contact.

Oxytocin has numerous health benefits. Some of these include:

- Stimulation of the immune system
- Decreased pain
- A more stable heart and breathing rate
- Decreased cholesterol levels
- Deeper sleeping patterns
- Reduced anxiety and stress
- Improved appetite
- Better attention span and memory
- Increased confidence and self-esteem
- Improved communication and reading ability
- Increased desire for social contact

Oxytocin is an important hormone in promoting maternal behaviour, bonding and attachment. In the final stages of pregnancy, oxytocin receptors in the mother's brain multiply rapidly preparing her for labour, lactation and motherhood. Oxytocin levels peak during labour causing permanent changes to nerve junctions in the right side of the brain. This has a powerful effect on the mother's emotional responses to her baby. Oxytocin also protects the baby from oxygen deprivation during delivery. In the male who is present before and after the birth, high oxytocin levels encourage him to become involved with the care of the baby.

Early nursing incites further oxytocin surges through the mother and baby promoting a sense of calm, contentedness and well being. Regular close physical contact enhances the effect. The hormone increases blood flow to the skin, which adds to the warmth of the parent's body and feelings of love towards the baby. The response is reciprocated. The baby's feet increase in temperature and the infant becomes calmer and more interested in social interaction.

The oxytocin response isn't automatic. Children whose early nurturing included anxiety, anger, abuse or neglect have lowered levels of the hormone in their blood. Some are unable to produce oxytocin in response to touch at all. As a consequence, they may suffer from emotional and behavioural difficulties when they go to nursery or school. Autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, anti-social behaviour, aggression, learning difficulties and the inability to form friendships are all associated with low levels of this important hormone. This is why oxytocin-responsive care in the baby's first year is so important.

Studies have shown that animal assisted therapies can have a positive impact on children with emotional and behavioural problems. Recent research in the field of autism has shown that stroking or cuddling a pet incites the release of oxytocin, which relieves stress, muscle tension and anxiety. In schools, the presence of a pet has been shown to promote trust and affection between pupils. Bullying has also decreased and reading scores have improved.

### **Animal assisted therapies**

The use of animals in health care dates back to the late 1700s. The first animal assisted therapy took place at the York Retreat in England, where psychiatric patients benefited from caring for small farm animals. Florence Nightingale also found small pets to be excellent companions for the sick. Later studies showed pet bonding to be effective in reducing epileptic seizures. Since then, a myriad

of animal treatments have been used for a wide array of disorders and conditions. For example, horse riding has helped to improve motor control and balance in children with neurological disorders. Centres where dolphins are brought into an enclosed environment have brought benefits to children with Down syndrome, autism and cerebral palsy. Fish, birds, reptiles, pot-bellied pigs, goats and llamas have also enriched the lives of children with special needs and disabilities.

### **Pet therapy**

Pet therapy has become a valuable aid in reaching out to ill and abused children. Children are usually extremely trusting and easily achieve a level of intimacy with animals. This special bond contributes to the animal's effectiveness as a co-therapist.

Importantly, pets provide emotional support and unconditional love and affection to children who do not receive the care and attention they so desperately need. They also provide positive benefits for children with speech and language difficulties. Animals provide opportunities for exercise, communication, cooperation and fun. They also enable children to process new smells, sounds and textures. In fact, the companionship of a pet has been shown to be more beneficial than conventional therapies such as arts and crafts programmes in improving overall health.

Pets are one of the best cures for loneliness and isolation, especially in the elderly. Hospitalised children who have regular visits from trained therapy animals are more receptive to medical treatment. Simply stroking or touching the fur of an animal can have a very positive impact on the quality of the child's life.

## Activities and outings

For many children, pets offer the opportunity to give and receive love. However, if it is impossible to have a pet, parents and practitioners can ensure that children benefit in the following ways:

- Visit a farm or pet centre where children can cuddle the lambs, rabbits and guinea pigs.
- Foster a pet for a limited period of time.
- Set out on a nature walk and listen out for the sounds of birds and animals.
- Organise a special week, where children can bring in their own pets.
- Take the children to a marine life centre, where they can see dolphins, seals and other sea life under semi-natural conditions.
- Invite a guide dog into the setting.
- Allow children to bring in their own soft toy animals or comforters that offer comfort and security when they need it.
- Post pictures of animals around the room, point to them and make their sounds.
- Start up a pet project and design a care plan for each animal.
- Invite a pet expert to talk to the class.
- Visit a zoo or bring the zoo to the setting (see 'Useful resources').
- Set up an aquarium in the classroom.
- Promote relaxation by listening to the sounds of whales and dolphins.
- Set up a birdfeeder outside the window.
- Bring internet resources into the setting.

## **Allergies**

Until recently, it was assumed that household pets increased the risk of asthma and allergies in childhood. Evidence suggests that the opposite is true. Babies that grow up with pets during the first year of life have much stronger immune systems than babies brought up without them. Early exposure to endotoxins (breakdown products of bacteria), commonly found in the mouths of dogs and cats, can reduce allergic responses to dust mites, grass pollens and mould spores as the child grows up.

## **Oppositions**

Despite the many benefits of pet therapy, concerns have been raised about safety issues such as bites and hostile reactions. However, there are no documented cases to show that supervised therapy poses a risk to children. Therapy animals are assessed by a veterinarian for health, temperament and behaviour. They are also trained to be calm and gentle.

Interactions with household pets should always be fully supervised. Even though most pets bond well with children, a baby or child must never be left alone with them. Dogs rarely attack children, but if shunted aside, they may solicit attention by growling and snapping. Frequently owners make the mistake of ignoring the pet when the baby is awake. The animal then associates the baby's presence with neglect. Long-term studies have shown that the incidence of bites and scratches is very low, unless the pet is poorly handled, frightened or neglected.

## **Promoting good practice**

Early years setting can promote good practice by setting high standards of animal care and by setting a good example. Encouraging children to take responsibility for the welfare of a pet is an important lesson for them. Encouragement and praise are important in raising self-esteem and confidence and no child should be made to feel inadequate or incapable of looking after a pet.

Before getting a pet, investigation should be undertaken into the requirements of the species under consideration as well as the resources required. The setting should have a written policy on handling procedures and an individual care plan for the animal. By so doing, everyone benefits from the many rewards of pet ownership. The production of oxytocin is also strongly provided for as well.

## **Key points**

- Research shows that regular, affectionate interaction with a caring adult increases oxytocin levels in the baby.
- Close physical contact with an animal can stimulate oxytocin release in children that have low levels of the hormone in their blood.
- Oxytocin-responsive care in the first year of life affects the ability to make friends and form loving relationships in the future.
- Having a pet enhances oxytocin flow, which in turn improves health and makes life more manageable.

### Useful resources:

'Animal Encounters' ([www.animalencountersltd.co.uk](http://www.animalencountersltd.co.uk)) offer children the opportunity to see and touch bearded dragons, fruit bats, snakes and a variety of wild animals in the classroom. Practitioners will need to budget for this activity, but it is personally recommended to be a wonderful and memorable experience!

'Pets as Therapy' ([www.petsastherapy.org.uk](http://www.petsastherapy.org.uk)) volunteers bring dogs and cats to many settings including hospitals and schools. The animals offer comfort, companionship and therapy to those that need it.

'Guide dogs for the Blind Association' ([www.guidedogs.org.uk](http://www.guidedogs.org.uk)). Register to receive news about guide dog activities, fundraising events, 'Pups Club' and school visits.

'National Pet Month' ([www.nationalpetmonth.org.uk](http://www.nationalpetmonth.org.uk)). If you are thinking about having a pet in an early years setting, then this website is well worth a visit!