

As a veterinarian my appreciation of the role pets play in the family environment increases exponentially with every day in practice. So much as already been written relating to the developmental of children and medical advantages of pets in the family environment. I am very aware of this aspect and remind myself each day of our task as veterinarians working with family pets which reverberates throughout the society and into every household.

The role of the pet is truly extraordinary as we learn about the impact of pets on the treatment of psychological and behavioral disorders in children and adults. A study of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) showed that the presence of animals increased their talking behavior, their looking at faces, and making tactile contact compared to the effect of these behaviors using toys. They also displayed more pro-social behaviors and positive affects like smiling and laughing as well as less self-focused behaviors and negative effects in the presence of animals compared to toys (1).

Use of animals in the psychiatric treatment of adult patients with post-traumatic disorders has been described. The authors concluded that Animal-Assisted Intervention (AAI) treatments showed promise in reducing depression, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and anxiety as a complimentary treatment and recommend further studies to establish the feasibility and efficacy of these treatments (2).

All the above examples cover pathological or medical issues. My interest is to speculate on what the effects are on normative children and adults in the presence of a pet in their environment. There are studies demonstrating that pets in the home cause children to be more responsible, sympathetic, empathetic and have more self-esteem (3). A recent publication has discussed the possibility of weight loss on children as a result of a pet in the family. Some parents found that their children grew up with fewer allergies in the presence of pets where others believed that the allergies of their children improved since owing a pet (4).

An issue of particular interest to me is the almost addictive use of “smart phones” by us and in particular the younger generation. Even in this respect pets may play a positive and even therapeutic role in concerning this troublesome practice. The lack of eye contact and face-to-face interactions is considered to result in adverse effects on relentless smart phone users possibly resulting in poor social skills. Luckily our pets cannot use these devices and so our contact with them must be direct. We are all aware that our pets exhibit “body language” behavior. I propose that interacting with our pets can improve our communication skills which can be learnt and enhanced by careful observation and interaction with our pets through eye contact and their “body language”.

The range of the positive attributes of animals on us humans appears to be endless.

From the behavioral point of view we may ask ourselves how this is possible and what mechanisms do our pets use to achieve these wondrous effects? Maybe, we as humans can use similar approaches to achieve comparable results in our day to day interaction with our fellow human beings? Is there something to be learnt from our companion animals? Maybe! One of the wonderful attributes of our pets is to accept us as we are, whether we are tall or short, fat or thin, depressed or happy. Unfortunately, we humans tend to be very discriminatory and be inclined to have difficulty in accepting those who are different from us in any way, be it for example in nationality, color, opinion or political views. Respect for each others’ is important for us in maintaining positive relationships with our family members, friends and associates. This is crucial in our day to day living.

Thus there seems to be many positive attributes to be learnt from our pets.

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