

Reading to Puppies & Other Pet Therapy Remedies

By ACSH Staff — January 28, 2016



[1] Boy reading to puppy via Shutterstock

Once upon a time [a \[2\] airplane-riding turkeys \[2\]](#) and [college dorm animals \[3\]](#) were unthinkable fantasies. And yet, as you can read for yourself from the links provided above, such spectacles have become a reality in recent years. The reason? Animal-assisted therapy.

Many people see pet therapy as a popular and proven path to improved mental and physical health. Meanwhile, skeptics criticize it as a dishonest way to bypass "No Pets" policies. So what's really going on with the pet therapy? Let's take a closer look.

Physical Health

Studies have shown a range of health benefits associated with pet therapy, particularly pertaining to cardiovascular disease, which is the leading cause of death in the United States, according to the [CDC \[4\]](#).

A [2013 American Heart Association review of studies \[5\]](#) showed that pet owners are more likely to have "lower systolic [or maximum] blood pressures than pet nonowners," and "both systolic and diastolic [minimum] blood pressures were significantly lower" for married couples "with a pet (cat or dog)" as compared to pet-less couples.

Animal-assisted therapy has also been linked to reduced pain. In a [2012 PubMed study \[6\]](#) of patients who underwent painful surgery, canine visitation therapy helped significantly to reduce their perceived pain. Many cognitive theories claim that the attention of animals distracts patients from their feelings of pain.

Mental Health

Pet therapy's greatest strengths may lie in its mental health benefits. Many [studies](#) [7] show that pet therapy improves social skills and decreases stress, anxiety and depression. Autistic people benefit greatly from the increased empathy provided by therapy animals. Many see the wide, tongue-wagging smile of a dog as a great boost to their day.

These same studies show that human-animal interactions may increase the brain's release of oxytocin through sensory stimulation. The release of this peptide hormone improves social skills and decreases stress, anxiety and depression.

Learning & Reading

If you're like most people, you might find it strange to see a someone reading aloud to a canary. Or a puppy. Or a goldfish. Yet doing so may actually have many benefits.

Reading programs emphasizing pet therapy have recently become very popular. Non-profit organizations such as [Intermountain Therapy Animals](#) [8], [Paws & Think](#) [9] and [Paws for People](#) [10] sprung up at the turn of the century, offering programs to help children and adults improve their reading abilities and confidence.

[Studies](#) [11] have shown that pet reading programs really do increase reading confidence. Many shy or undereducated students -- ranging from young children to 30-year-old adults -- are reluctant to read in front of others due to anxiety or embarrassment. Pet therapy can help address this problem, since in this case the audience is decidedly less critical than most.

A number of theories support the correlation between animal attention and reading confidence. One of these, known as the [Biophilia](#) [12] Hypothesis, claims that humans form an innate and beneficial bond with nature and other creatures. Meanwhile, the "[Social Support](#) [13]" theory claims that therapy animals provide a form of nonjudgmental support lacking in human interactions.

Nonjudgmental therapy animals make these types of students feel more comfortable. As time passes, their reading abilities often increase, until they finally feel confident reading to other humans.

While naysayers believe that have a point, that some people use pet therapy as an excuse to bring their pets into otherwise pet-free zones, there is evidence to the contrary that even they could benefit from the animal love and care provided by pet therapy.

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Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2016/01/28/pet-therapy-popularity-justified>

Links

[1] http://acsh.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/shutterstock_189651419.jpg

[2] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-35301871>

[3] <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2016/01/11/ohio-state-ohio-university-allow-therapy-animals-in-housing.html>

[4] <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/leading-causes-of-death.htm>

[5] <http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/early/2013/05/09/CIR.0b013e31829201e1.full.pdf>

- [6] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22233395>
- [7] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3408111/>
- [8] <http://www.therapyanimals.org/Home.html>
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- [11] https://www.nmu.edu/sites/DrupalEducation/files/UserFiles/Files/Pre-Drupal/SiteSections/Students/GradPapers/EdSpecialist/Dunlap_Vicki_EP.pdf
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- [13] [http://www.psy.cmu.edu/~scohen/Lakey%20%26%20Cohen%20\(2000\).pdf](http://www.psy.cmu.edu/~scohen/Lakey%20%26%20Cohen%20(2000).pdf)