

Ask A Vet: The Human-Animal Bond

Sunday, June 8, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My sister and I are trying to convince our parents to let us get a puppy. We promise to take good care of it and help train it to be a good dog when it grows up. Our friends have all kinds of pets - dogs, cats, ponies, calves, goats, fish, etc. - the list is endless. Can you help us?

-Need a Best Friend in Benton

Dear Reader,

Animal ownership is a big responsibility that you and your sister need to take very seriously. With that said there are many benefits to animal ownership to you and your family that most people don't realize. The human-animal bond is an amazing and complex relationship that is being studied worldwide. The relationship between people and animals is essential to the well being of both. Families studied before and after acquiring a pet reported being happier after adding a pet to the family. Studies have shown animals can greatly influence how we feel about ourselves and life in general. They can teach us many things about interacting with others and help heal us and keep us healthy.

Convincing research has shown that having pets does have a very positive impact on various aspects of our physical and mental health. Starting with just the benefits of better physical health due to the exercise of walking your dog or riding your horse to the emotional and social benefits of animal ownership. Pets decrease our feelings of loneliness and isolation and provide consistency to our lives because they are with us day in and day out. Caring for our animals gives us a reason to live as we know they depend on us and we look forward to the activity of feeding, grooming, and providing shelter for them. They help us relax and get away from our problems and worries. Fish in an aquarium, birds in a cage, cows in the pasture - they give us a sense of well being.

Proven physical benefits abound. Starting with how long we live - did you know that pet owners actually live longer on the average than non pet owners? Dogs have been shown to reduce blood pressure in a number of populations. Dog ownership increases the odds for survival in persons that have had a heart attack from 1 in 15 to 1 in 87 according to one study. Other studies suggest that pet ownership may actually decrease the risk of heart attacks. Nursing homes and hospitals now welcome animal visits when possible and tangible results abound. Nursing facilities where companion animals became part of the therapy reported decreases in the overall cost of caring for patients and decreases in the use of prescription drugs. Therapy from horses and riding horses is also part of pet therapy. Riding teaches balance and flexibility to the handicapped. Horsemanship skills and horse care are well proven therapies for children and adults.

A dog's sense of smell is 10,000 to 100,000 times better than ours! They can be trained to provide all kinds of health services for us. Researchers at Cambridge University are using dogs to detect prostate

cancer from men's urine samples. Dogs can also be trained to detect bladder cancer, melanoma skin cancer, and the list goes on and on.

How many accounts of animal heroism are in the news daily? They save our lives, enhance our lives, and provide fodder for endless conversation. In my career I constantly marvel at the enrichment the human-animal bond gives our lives. I see the love and concern people show for animals when they are injured or ill and share their tears upon occasion. From a little girl's kitten to a farmer's cow, the human-animal bond undeniable and wonderful! Here's hoping you get your best friend and remember that animal ownership is a privilege that comes with a lot of responsibility. GOOD LUCK!

-Dr. Jerry Sellon