

The Furry Key to Unlocking a Healthier Childhood

In an era where screen time often eclipses outdoor play, a surprising ally emerges in the quest for kids' health.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Getting a dog led to significant jumps in activity levels among young kids, according to a study of 600 children
- Considering many children don't meet recommended daily activity levels, this suggests a four-legged friend may be good for kids' health
- Girls who got a dog increased their physical activities by about 52 minutes per day
- Both girls and boys who got a dog showed an increase in unstructured physical activities by nearly seven occasions per week
- Beyond physical activity, animals play a positive role in children's emotional, social and cognitive development

Children experience many benefits when they get to share their lives with a pet. From learning responsibility and empathy to enjoying companionship and boosting confidence, animals play a positive role in kids' emotional, social and cognitive development.

A boost to physical activity is another key benefit, which was the focus of a study published in the International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity.¹ Getting a dog led to significant jumps in activity levels among young kids. Considering many children don't meet recommended daily activity levels, this suggests a four-legged friend may be good for kids' health.

Children Are More Active When They Have a Dog

Researchers from the University of Western Australia followed 600 children between the ages of 2 and 7 years over a three-year period, using data from the Play Spaces and Environments for Children's Physical Activity (PLAYCE) cohort study. The study categorized participants into four groups based on their dog ownership status during the study. The groups included those who:²

- Never owned a dog
- Owned a dog for the entire study
- Got a dog during the study
- Lost a dog during the study

Measurements of children's daily activities — including physical activity, sedentary behavior, sleep and screen time — were gathered and compared with their dog ownership status. Findings revealed significant differences in physical activities among girls who either gained or lost a dog.

Specifically, girls who got a dog increased their physical activities by about 52 minutes per day, while those who lost a dog decreased similar activities by about 62 minutes daily, compared to those who never owned a dog. Both girls and boys who got a dog showed an increase in unstructured physical activities by nearly seven occasions per week, while those who lost a dog saw a decrease in such activities. According to study author Emma Adams:³

"What we found is that adding a dog to the household increased young girl's light intensity, physical activity by 52 minutes a day — or almost an hour. So that's quite substantial. It could make a meaningful difference to their health and wellbeing."

Adults Are Also More Active When They Have a Dog

It's not only children who get up and move more when sharing their home with a pup. Adult dog owners also tend to be more physically active than non-dog owners. Among older women, for instance, dog ownership was associated with a higher likelihood of walking at least 150 minutes a week and a lower likelihood of being sedentary for eight or more hours a day.⁴

Other research that involved reviewing data from nine studies revealed that nearly 2 in 3 dog owners walked their dogs, and those who did were more than 2.5 times more likely to engage in healthy amounts of moderate-intensity physical activity each week.

"These findings suggest that dog walking may be a viable strategy for dog owners to help achieve levels of PA [physical activity] that may enhance their health," according to study authors.⁵

Dogs Also Benefit Children's Minds

Beyond physical activity, children also stand to grow intellectually when they have a dog. Reading to a therapy dog, for instance, "motivates children to read challenging passages and increases their level of persistence to keep reading," according to a study by University of British Columbia researchers.⁶

"Our study focused on whether a child would be motivated to continue reading longer and persevere through moderately challenging passages when they are accompanied by a dog," study author Camille Rousseau said in a news release,⁷ and the results were encouraging.

The study focused on 17 young readers in grades 1 to 3, who were given reading materials that would provide a slight challenge. Participants engaged in reading aloud under three distinct conditions: to a therapy dog, to a human observer and without the presence of a dog.

After reading each passage, the children were given the choice to either stop reading or continue with another piece of text. The results showed that the presence of a therapy dog notably increased the children's willingness to read more and their persistence in tackling challenging reading materials.⁸

"Specifically, children confirmed feeling significantly more interested and more competent when reading in the presence (versus absence) of a therapy dog," the researchers explained.⁹ The children also spent significantly more time reading when a therapy dog was present.

As Rousseau explained, "The findings showed that children spent significantly more time reading and showed more persistence when a dog — regardless of breed or age — was in the room as opposed to when they read without them."¹⁰

Considerations Before Getting a Dog for Your Child

While there are clear-cut benefits to growing up with a furry best friend, choosing to add a dog to your household should be one made by the entire family. It's usually children over the age of 5 who begin to show real interest in a dog, cat or other animal. That's a good thing, because children younger than 5 can't be expected to handle the responsibility of caring for a pet.

Parents must understand that ultimately the care for the animal is their responsibility, and practical considerations, such as whether you have enough space in your home and time to devote to a pet, should also be considered.

Then, set expectations ahead of time regarding caretaking responsibilities, so children are clear on what they're taking on. It's also important to talk to children about how to interact with a dog in a safe, respectful way. If you decide a dog is right for your household, look at shelters and rescue organizations in your area for an **adoptable animal** to complete your family.

Sources and References

^{1,2} [Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act 21, 7 \(2024\)](#).

³ [NPR February 4, 2024](#)

⁴ [Prev Med. 2015 Jan;70:33-8](#)

⁵ [J Phys Act Health. 2015 Jun 16;12 Suppl 1:S102-9](#)

^{6,8,9} [Anthrozoos September 20, 2019](#)

^{7,10} [Science Daily December 2, 2019](#)
