



# pets are good for you...

A report into  
the benefits of pet ownership  
January 2003



# Foreword

Ask any pet owner why they should want to share their life with a pet and you will get many different answers, but one common point of view is sure to emerge. Quite simply, people like pets because they enrich their lives.

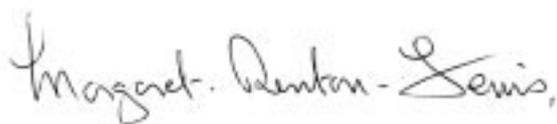
Humans are a unique species in that we seek out animals, not only to make them serve us in some way but also for us to befriend and care for them and in ideal conditions to let them become part of our extended family.

In the 1970s, a great deal of research on the relationship and bonds between humans and animals was carried out by University psychologists in the U.S.A., the UK and Australia.

Working independently, they all came to the same conclusion: that pets acted as therapy by providing the 'feel-good' factor which is vital to the maintenance of mental health, for people in different countries, with different life styles and conditions.

The research has continued through the years and this report illustrates the many and varied ways in which pets are helping us today. But pet keeping is a two-sided relationship. If we are to fulfil our commitment to our connection with the animal world we must be constantly aware of the physical and emotional needs of our pets.

The Pet Care Trust, through its education programme and its members, is committed to pet keeping based on the concept of Responsible Pet Ownership. When you read this report I know you will agree that this is the least we can do for the pets which continue to enrich our lives in so many ways.



Margaret Renton-Ferris  
BVA PTA Diploma LCGI

## Contents

The joy of pets	5
Why we love them	7
Animal magic –	
they help keep us healthy	9
The healing touch	11
A friend to learn from	
and lean on	13
Lessons of life	15
Part of the family	17
Comfort in the golden days	19
Breaking the ice	21
Heroes and legends	23
A lifetime commitment	25
Acknowledgements	26



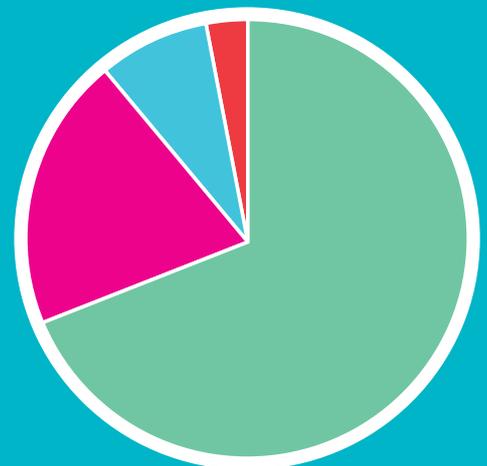
### Popularity stakes

Cats	7.5 million
Dogs	6.1 million
Rabbits	1.1 million
Hamsters	860,000
Guinea Pigs	730,000
Budgies	750,000
Canaries	260,000
Other birds	1 million+

Source — Pet Food Manufacturers' Association

### How many pets?

- 69% of pet owners have one animal
- 20% have 2 pets
- 8% have 3 pets
- 3% have 4 or more



Source: BMRB

# The joy of pets



We love our pets. We enjoy their company and are fascinated by their behaviour. We instinctively know that owning pets is good for us and as you will see, scientific research proves us right.

Humans are unique as the only animals that seek to befriend and keep other species. This relationship led to leading scientist and conservationist Edward Wilson coining the word 'biophilia' – the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life.

That's one way of explaining why so many of us are 'driven' to seek animals for companionship and why we usually feel calmer or happier when we interact with them. There's also something mysterious about them – the ability some animals appear to have to 'know' things beyond the perception of human senses.

For example, cats may disappear when people are thinking about taking them to the vet, even before the carrying basket appears. Dogs may howl mournfully when their owner dies, even though they are not nearby. Pets are often highly attuned to their owners and will go to great lengths to find them or even save their lives. This love also has positive practical effects – it can heal, both physically and spiritually.

Animal lovers have been aware of this for some time and it is also validated by scientific researchers.

According to Britain's Pet Food Manufacturers' Association (PFMA), almost half of all households in the country – that means more than 11 million – have at least one pet.

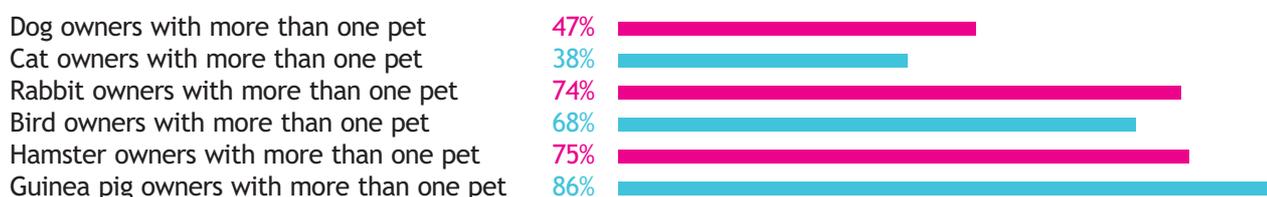
Many homes have more than one.

The PFMA reckons that nearly a quarter of all dog-owners have more than one dog (giving a total population of 6.1 million) and according to research conducted by the British Market Research Bureau for this publication, 47% of dog owners own another type of pet.

Multiple-cat ownership is even higher, with a third of owners having more than one, making cats our most popular pet at 7.5 million. (Well, that's excluding fish, of course – we have nearly 25 million of them in our homes!)

Guinea pigs, rabbits and hamsters are most likely to 'share' their owners with other pets – usually cats or dogs. Including fish, the PFMA statistics suggest we have about 43 million animals in our homes – that's about two animals for every three humans.

## Keeping good company – owners with more than one pet

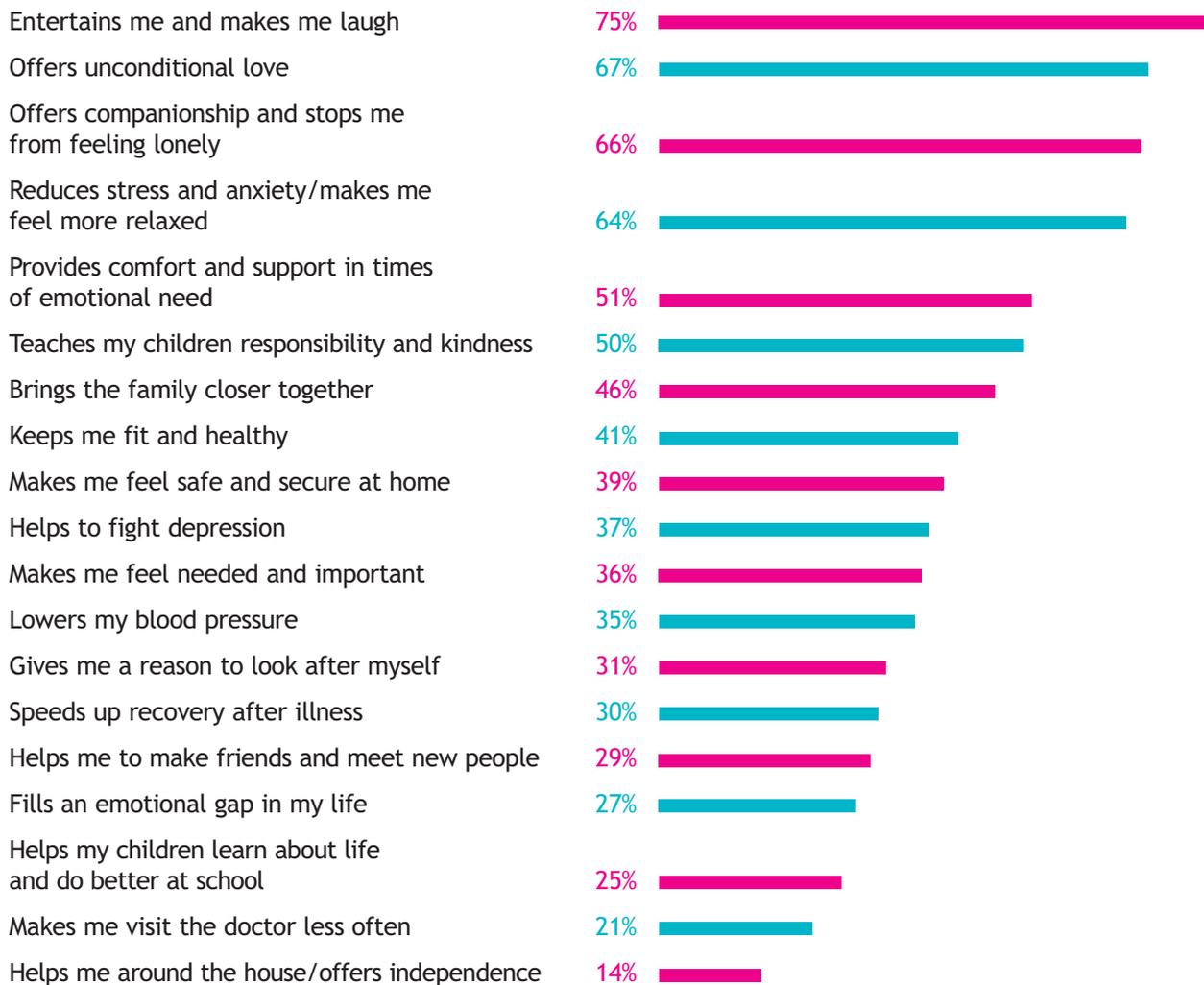


Around a quarter of dog owners also have a cat  
**51%** of those who own a bird also own a dog.

Cats and birds are a less likely mix  
 just **17%** of bird owners also have a cat.

100%

## Key benefits – what the owners say...



Source: BMRB – October 2002



# Why we love them

“I own a one year-old cat called Pilchard. The main benefits I can see from having her around is she acts like a friend, she is always there for a cuddle, she greets you so eagerly when you come home from work, she (although very tiny) helps me feel secure when I am in by myself as she is aware of every little sound and movement outside the house. She is a companion to my Kathryn – aged 5 – and lets her dress her up in baby clothes from time to time. She is a source of amusement to my partner Mark as she thinks she is a dog (she jumps across about 7 garden fences to greet Mark when he turns up in his van each night)!”

Lisa Carter, Liverpool

A survey by British Market Research Bureau (BMRB), commissioned for this publication, gives us a powerful insight into why people have pets.

The random sample of 1,015 adults reflected general levels of pet ownership, with about half of those responding having a companion animal in their home and with cats being the most popular, followed by dogs.

The main reason we own pets is quite simply for the entertainment they provide. Three quarters of people surveyed agreed that their pet entertains them and makes them laugh. Not surprisingly, this was closely followed by the fact that pets offer unending affection and unconditional love, with 70% regarding this as a key benefit.

Companionship and avoidance of loneliness were mentioned by 66% of owners – more so among women, older people and ‘blue collar’ social groups. This is not only due to the comfort derived from the pet itself – ownership (particularly of dogs) is also seen as helping owners make friends and meet new people.

Interestingly, most owners believe that their pets offer genuine health benefits, with 64% agreeing that owning a pet reduces stress, anxiety and aids relaxation. This is particularly significant for men aged 45 and over.

Just under half of people surveyed agreed that their pets keep them fit and healthy, believing that owning a pet helps to fight depression and reduce blood pressure.

One in five people even reported fewer trips to the doctor as a result.

The invaluable contribution that pets make to our emotional well-being was also highlighted strongly.

Half of the people we spoke to said that they look to their pet for comfort and support in times of emotional need, a quarter agreed that their pet fills an emotional gap in their life and a third

particularly value the fact that pets make them feel needed and important.

The survey also underlines the importance of pets to families with children. Not only are pets seen as bringing the family closer together but 62% of those with families also value their pets for teaching children responsibility and kindness, with a quarter of people believing that this helps children perform better at school.

These findings support scientific research discussed throughout this report, which consistently shows genuine physical and psychological benefits of ownership.





Our research says...

4 out of 10 agree that owning a pet keeps them fit and healthy...

Over many decades, research into the advantages of pet ownership has repeatedly suggested that owning a pet can genuinely improve our mental and physical health. Those benefits identified so far include:

- Lower blood pressure and heart rate
- Reduced stress and anxiety
- Less cholesterol and triglyceride fats in the body
- Better progress and speedier recovery from illness and surgery
- Better survival rates after heart attacks
- Greater protection from some illnesses and fewer visits to the doctor's
- Reduced levels of headaches, indigestion and insomnia
- Lower frequency of allergies



# Animal magic — they help keep us healthy

The health benefits of pet ownership are related to two main factors — the psychological benefits of animal companionship and the health boost from physical exercise.

## Heart-warming

The impact of pets on potential cardiovascular diseases (arteriosclerosis, angina, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart attack, stroke, arrhythmia) has been a major research focus.

For example, one of the biggest recent projects, covering 5,741 people over three years at the Baker Medical Research Institute in Australia, showed that pet owners generally had lower blood pressure and triglyceride and cholesterol levels than did non-owners, a result that could not be explained by personal circumstances, such as cigarette smoking, diet, weight or socio-economic profile.

Other studies provide support for this conclusion:

- Pet-owning 40-60 year olds had significantly lower levels of known risk factors for cardiovascular disease (Jennings et al)
- Simply being in the presence of a dog or petting an animal can reduce blood pressure (Friedmann et al)
- The long-term survival rate of pet-owning heart attack victims was significantly longer than for those who did not own a pet

On this latter point, researchers at Texas A&M University say that having a pet may decrease heart attack mortality rates by 3% and the Animal Allies Humane Society reports that a pet may be a more powerful survival factor even than marital status or access to other human support!

The defining piece of study in this area, by Aaron Katcher and James Lynch, followed a group of heart patients for several years during the late 1970s. Not surprisingly, the most potent factor influencing long-term survival was the damage to the heart tissue itself.

“Yet we were scarcely prepared to believe the second most important variable,” Lynch recalls. “Those heart patients who had pets had a far better chance of living than those who did not have pets.”

One underlying factor behind many of these discoveries seems to relate to the way some pets help reduce stress. For example, petting an animal is a rhythmic, repetitive activity — almost a form of meditation — which, according to Professor Sam Ahmedzai of Sheffield University Medical School, has been shown to reduce tension and blood pressure, increasing the body’s natural mood enhancing chemicals and decreasing levels of cortisol, a substance associated with stress.

Similarly, watching fish in an aquarium can be as effective as hypnosis in cutting anxiety and discomfort during dental surgery (Katcher et al) while, in a recent survey for the American Pet Products Manufacturers’ Association, 70% of respondents said that when they’re stressed or worried, playing with or confiding in a pet relaxed them.

## The fitness factor

Pets, particularly dogs and horses, if we look after them properly, help keep us fit and healthy through increased and regular exercise but there’s also evidence that psychology plays a part in this fitness too.

Scientists at Cambridge University’s Companion Animal Research Group tracked the health status and behaviour of 71 adults who had newly acquired a pet. They reported a significant reduction in minor health problems even during the first month and this was sustained for the entire 10 months of the study.

James Lynch sums up all of these remarkable findings neatly: “Whether it is the enhanced reaction produced by pet animals in the classroom when children read books aloud or the lowering of blood pressure in the elderly when they pet an animal, or the role animals play in social support and long-term survival of heart patients, the evidence is overwhelming.”



“ The importance of animals to the well-being of people is becoming more and more evident. This is especially true as we realize that at no time in history have so many members of Western society been devoid of healthy interaction among themselves and with the environment. Deprivation of nurturing opportunities and compartmentalization has resulted in increased stress, depression, loneliness and overall serious challenges to the health and well-being of a significant segment of our population.

Companion animals have refused compartmentalization and serve as nurturers for many people; they are also objects of nurture, promoting touching, playing and sharing with few time restraints. ”

Leo K Bustad, co-founder and first president of the Delta Society

# The healing touch



As scientists and researchers broaden and deepen their investigations of the apparent health benefits of pet ownership, one significant theory that has been developed is the view that actual physical contact between animal and human is a powerful influence.

One of the world's foremost investigators of the human-animal bond, Aaron Katcher, points out that the very word we use for a companion animal – 'pet' – also means 'to touch', while another leading authority, Leo Bustad, once said: "I believe there is overwhelming evidence that human health and well-being depend on the quality of social interrelationships throughout life."

This may be why using pets to aid patient recovery or even to comfort people in bereavement or through terminal illness is now an accepted practice at a growing number of hospitals and nursing homes. It's officially called Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) and can take many forms.

Sometimes, patients respond to their own pets being brought into hospital for them but the most popular form of the therapy is called the Visiting Animals Scheme, which involves volunteers taking their own animals into hospitals or residential care institutions.

A survey of hospitals in several parts of the United States (Montague) showed that average medication costs dropped from \$3.80 (about £2.50) to just \$1.18 (80p) per patient per day in new nursing home facilities that have animals and plants as an integral part of the environment.

Although for most people the notion of a pet that provides comfort tends to conjure up images of little furry animals, one interesting study (Eddy) suggests petting almost any species might have a beneficial effect – not least because this study showed how an owner relaxed and lowered his blood pressure as he stroked his pet boa constrictor!

Other examples of recently reported findings include:

- Pet-owning senior citizens made 21% fewer visits to the doctor's and reported fewer headaches, less indigestion, less difficulty sleeping and less depression. In fact, the study of 1,000 seniors by epidemiologist Judith Siegel showed it didn't matter what medical condition they were suffering from or how serious the medical condition was; those who had dogs for friends seemed dramatically less prone to seek medical care, especially the kind that really wasn't necessary.
- Children who own pets had stronger immune systems and took fewer days off sick from school.

Researchers, led by psychologist Dr June McNicholas at Warwick University, found the benefits of owning a cat or dog are most pronounced in children aged five to eight – they get up to 18 and a half days more schooling per year compared with their non-pet-owning counterparts

- Children, in a Scandinavian study throughout the 80s and early 90s, who had been exposed to pets during the first year of life had a lower frequency of asthma and some allergies such as rhinitis (Hesselmar)
- In psychotherapy sessions and in psychiatric institutions, animal association successfully helps patients work through their anxiety and despair. (Holcomb and Meacham)

Overall, what is startling about these findings is not just the impact pets seem to have on particular health issues or treatments but also the sheer range and breadth of the disorders they appear to affect positively.

## Our research says...

1 in 5 people agree that owning a pet reduces visits to the doctor, rising to 40% among those over 65. 66% of owners agree that pets offer companionship and stop them feeling lonely.

Our research says...

Six out of 10 families with children agree that owning a pet teaches children responsibility and kindness. One quarter say pets help children learn about life and do better at school

“If you had a row with a human family member, your pet became your ally, they were assumed to be on your side – and through lack of their communication skills, no one could argue any different with you. The furry kind made good pillows to cry into when a teenager – my cats all have dents in them where I used them to cry on”  
Claire McDonald, London

# A friend to learn from and lean on

The bond between children and their pets is the stuff of some of the greatest movies and novels of all-time. But although most of these are fiction, the relationships they portray are often well-grounded in fact.

Pets, after all, are non-judgmental playmates who will provide entertainment and exercise on demand. They are always willing to chase a toy, go for a walk, squawk or be cuddled. And since play is an essential feature of social, physical and emotional growth for children, the role of pets is potentially immensely important.

There is clear scientific evidence that children growing up with a pet develop better socially and academically and have a greater respect for all sorts of other creatures.

The relationship can start when a child is a small infant. Very young children usually talk to and hug their pets while others, from pre-school through to adolescence, use pets as attachment figures for reassurance in times of insecurity. The pet can become the child's safety blanket.

Pet ownership may help children learn to talk, first by the animal seeming to be an infinitely patient recipient of the gurgling and spluttering of the child and later by showing response to commands.

Reviewing more than 20 years of global research into the link, New Zealand academics Monica Kyone and Kevin Stafford suggest that teaching a pet new tricks may help young children understand that even small achievements often demand a lot of effort. This can help overcome the frustration of the child's own slow process of learning a difficult task.

Owning a pet provides a child with knowledge of animals, which, in turn, can lead to the child learning more empathy and having a more humane attitude to other beings in general. Pets help children learn about responsibility; looking after an animal builds the self-esteem of a child and makes him or her feel more competent.

Owning and caring for an animal also can give youngsters a valuable insight into broader issues relating to the environment.

“Owning pets instils a sense of responsibility and understanding in children. Through this they are more likely to develop a wider understanding of the natural world as well as the desire to conserve it.” David Bellamy

Pets can also help bridge the gap between childhood and adult life, during puberty and adolescence providing comfort and stability, supporting the teenager who is trying to make sense of the world.

Youngsters can unload their problems, fears and concerns to them without fear of being judged. Animals are always good listeners, never give bad advice and are always supportive; when everyone seems to be against them – so often a characteristic of teenage angst and more so these days as smaller families mean less sibling support – a pet may seem to be the only ally, a best friend in the home.

In recent years, animals also have been used as a way of reaching out, bridging the gap between adults and children with problems such as Attention Deficit Disorder and autism and even those who have been the victims of cruel abuse. And they've been used successfully as intermediaries in re-establishing person-to-person communications in the treatment of people with drug dependency. According to Dr A B Charnaud, a consultant psychiatrist with Cornwall Community Drugs team: “We find that once a patient has made an attachment to a dog, then this is the beginning of their rehabilitation and through working on this attachment and supporting it we can often then enable them to begin to form trust again with a human being”.

Seen from these many perspectives, our pets are revealed to be almost essential companions of the fascinating and challenging process of 'growing up'.



Breath of fresh air

“ I don't think you can really put into words how important pets are and how much they offer in terms of companionship, confidence and general well being. I think that children who grow up in a household with pets generally have more confidence and a better understanding of responsibility. This was certainly true in my case as (depending on how strict your parents are!) you are responsible for ensuring the well being of another animal which teaches you important skills for later life. Also, especially with dogs and horses, they really get you out of the house which is vital for all ages. A lot has been said about children not getting enough exercise and fresh air – so having a dog really helps to counteract this. ”

Sarah Dufton, Manchester

“Until recently, my daughters Kirsten (11) and Megan (8) – had a hamster called Cuddles, who has sadly passed away. Before that, we have had fish and previously, birds. The benefits of these pets, I feel, is: They can be an introduction to some sort of responsibility to children (feeding, exercise etc). They give an introduction to life beyond dolls, TV etc. They offer the opportunity to communicate with friends who also have pets, and they are fun!” Dave Hall, South Wirral

# Lessons of life

Many parents believe that pets can help educate children about life events. According to the Delta Society – a research organisation focused on the human-animal bond – two such situations where parental reactions probably influence children is when an animal is born or when it dies.

Children who have pets in the family will probably experience the death of an animal, a painful experience and the way in which their parents and others near to them deal with the situation will have an influence on how children cope with death in general throughout their lives.

Researchers have also found evidence that attachment to a pet – rather than just being in a household where there is an animal – may be a particular benefit to children. Dr Nienke Endenburg, of the University of Utrecht, Netherlands told a 2002 conference organised by the Society for Companion Animal Studies (SCAS), “Being attached to a pet is related to positive emotional functioning and the positive self-esteem of children is enhanced by owning a pet.”

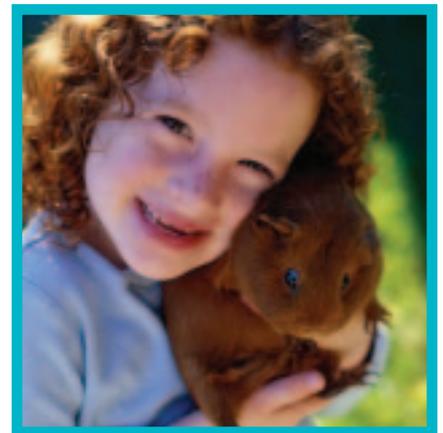
What’s more, in an age of computers and high-technology, pets can provide our children with a grounding in a more basic element of life.

For example, the American Pet Products Manufacturers’ Association (APPMA) reports that, when asked if pets create a healthier balance with the increasing presence of technology in the home, 79% of respondents said ‘yes’.

Says APPMA spokesperson Funda Alp: “Nowadays, with kids either online for homework or fun, playing with their Gameboy-like toys or succumbing to the more traditional technological influences of television, Walkmen and boom boxes (portable stereo systems), it can be hard to separate your kid from all the gadgets. People seem to feel that having a pet, a real being to care for and be with, helps balance the cold influence technology can have on the home.”

And as our children themselves become adults, pets past and present help to generate a strong and important link back to those formative years, reinforcing the warm and positive memories of growing up.

In fact, one could say there is a sense in which companion animals contribute, through the stages of childhood and adolescence, to the eventual shaping of the adult in a way that perhaps no human – parent, sibling or friend – can do.



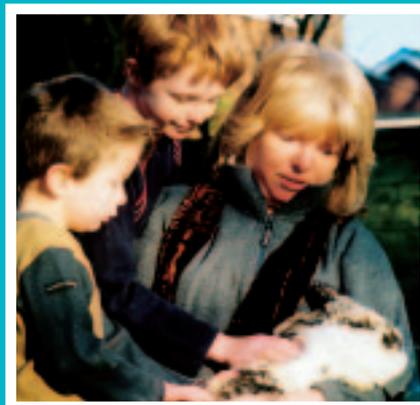
It brought tears to my eyes  
“I remember overhearing my daughter Natasha comforting Kara, our remaining rabbit, after the death of Doodles, Kara’s sister. Although only 5 at the time, Natasha was encouraging Kara to be positive. “Don’t worry” she said, “Doodles is still here, it’s just that you can’t see her because she has gone to live with God and be an angel. There she is, up in the sky, watching over you”. Such a beautiful, simplistic, peaceful vision, it brought tears to my eyes.”

Belinda Phillips, Manchester



Our research says...

Five out of 10 owners agree that pets bring the family closer together



A focus for the family

“My two grown up children both own dogs and every Saturday, we all meet to walk the dogs in the park. I live alone and it has become the highlight of my week – it’s so nice to have the whole family together, watching the dogs play with my grandchildren.”  
Joan Miller, Bury

Family harmony – the cat has stopped many a row...

“We have a gorgeous, fat, lazy cat. She is someone to come home to and someone to stop us arguing – when we raise our voices she gets upset so we have to stop and talk quietly”

Sandy Lindsay, Manchester

# Part of the family



Well-loved animals are not only regarded as real members of the families to which they belong but they can also play a role in strengthening family relationships.

They happily straddle generation gaps, sharing their time with each and every member. They don't take sides and they stand outside the normal hierarchical parent-child structure.

Their welfare is often a family issue in which everyone has a stake and they are a subject of interest and discussion shared by all. Sometimes, magically, they can be a spell-breaker with their antics, demolishing family tensions and demonstrating affection.

Dog ownership is associated with greater family cohesion. A team lead by British scientist Elizabeth Paul found that when a pet is introduced into the household, there is a marked increase, at least initially, in the frequency of children's interactions with other members of the family, especially through collective activities like taking walks together.

Writing in Family and Marriage Review, A O Cain. asserts that more than half of families experience an increase in the time they spent together after getting pets. As many as 70%

reported an increase in family happiness and fun subsequent to pet acquisition.

A survey of 60 families with pets ranging from cats and dogs to monkeys and goats, showed that families became closer as soon as the animal became part of the household. Researcher S. Duncan found children argued less and co-operated more. Parents got along better, too. It seems that at least for these families, benevolence toward animals and benevolence toward one another went hand in hand.

Of course, there are times too when pets actually are the family – that is to say they are the 'survivors' after children have grown up and left the 'nest' or on occasions where couples have either chosen or simply not been able to have children.

Research in this area has demonstrated that pets meet an important emotional need and their well-being and status are regarded as every bit as important as that of their human equivalents. The sense of 'parental responsibility' that many owners feel is often underlined.

Talking about taking their pet to the vet's, a respondent in a study for the insurance company Petplan said: "It makes me feel

motherly, monitoring my pet's growth and development," and on giving medication: "It felt good as my pet trusted me." And in a survey for the pet nutrition division of Procter & Gamble, some 86% of pet owners agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "My relationship with my pet is intimate and affectionate;" a third of all dog owners have their animals sleeping in the bedroom – with half of these apparently sleeping in their owner's beds; some 88% of all dog owners play with their pet; and almost 6 out of 10 of us walk the dog at least twice a day.

No wonder nearly half the population of Britain owns a pet. They help strengthen relations within a family, they bridge the generation gap and they share their loyalty with everyone – and without judgment.

Chicken – from a veggie

“I have a cat, 14 years old called Winnie, black short hair, long legs and a huge long tail. She is very very affectionate and generally quite good company around the house. She's very spoilt, gets to sleep on/in the bed. We are veggie but we buy fresh chicken for her, she even goes on holiday to Scotland with us. She leads a charmed life”

Jill Thomas, Cheshire



#### Our research says...

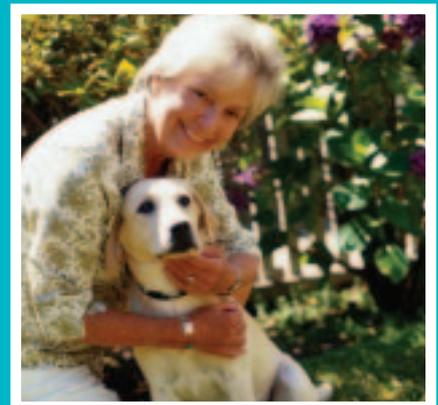
82% of all seniors say their pet offers unconditional love  
81% cite companionship  
75% say their animals entertain them.

Agreement with every benefit statement increases dramatically with age and is particularly marked for benefits associated with emotional support and health.

#### Recipe for keeping fit

“We have always been a family of dog lovers and believe that owning dogs is the best way to stay fit and healthy. Although we are both in our seventies, the dogs encourage us to lead active, sociable lives. We take the dogs for a run on the field every single day, rain or shine and have a circle of dog owning friends that we meet every day on our walks. We are both fortunate in that we are so healthy.

I can't remember the last time either of us needed to visit the doctor. Exercising Bella and Sukey in the park every day keeps us young and healthy”



Jeff and Jean McGilvray, Whitefield

# Comfort in the golden days

There is no better example of the sheer joy of pet companionship than in the relationship between older folk and their much-loved animals.

A Warwick University study of the role of pets in older people's lives found that their pets benefit them by companionship, increased levels of activity and better communication with other people because pets act as social catalysts. They also found that pets help the elderly maintain self care routines, for example sticking to regular meals, keeping up adequate room temperatures and an added reason to make shopping trips.

The researchers said that pets can provide valuable support during the early stages of bereavement because of the need for daily routines and by providing a comforting presence at a time when people feel a great sense of loneliness.

In some cases the pets were what the researchers call a repository of memories – a reminder and link with the person who has died.

In a further study by A.H. Kidd and B.M. Fieldmann, elderly pet-owners were said to act with a greater sense of responsibility; they were regarded as more reliable or dependable, lacked egotism and self-centredness. Most were more helpful and benevolent and were more independent and self-sufficient than non pet-owners.

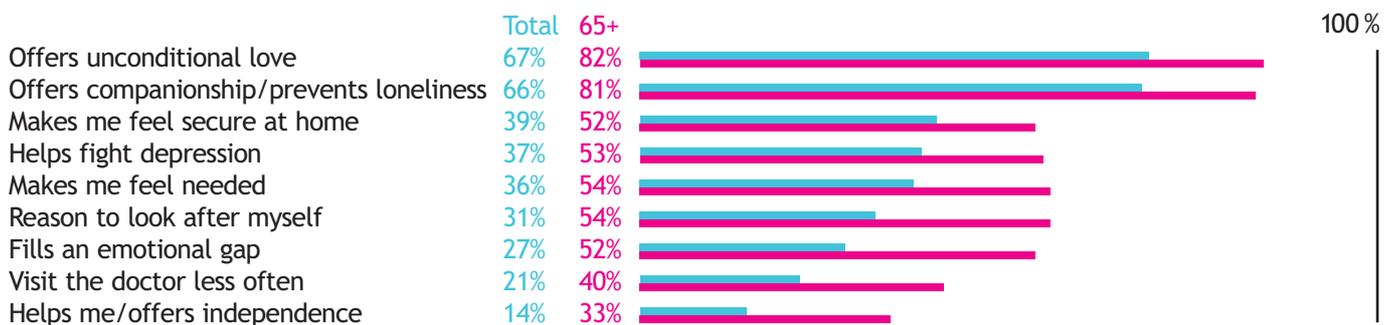
Surveying the massive volume of studies and research findings in this field, Monica Kyone and Kevin Stafford say: "As people live longer, the question of how to maintain a dignified, sustained quality of life becomes more vital. Pets can restore order to the lives of the elderly, provide a more secure grasp of reality and link them to an intense emotional relationship."

In this way, taking care of a pet can serve as an alarm clock for elderly people reminding them to take care of themselves too, says the Pet Information Bureau.

"In fact, animal companionship can dramatically improve the quality of life and may even have a positive impact on longevity," it adds. "Animals also give us a much-needed natural outlet for touching and cuddling – especially to those who live alone."

To a child, a pet may be a playmate, but to an older person, an animal becomes a companion and confidant, a friend and an aid to independence. Pet ownership means exercise and responsibility. The importance and value of the animal companionship role is perhaps at its peak with our seniors, warming the glow of their golden days.

## Older people appreciate the benefits most







# Breaking the ice

## Best friends lead to more friends

“ I personally have two pet dogs, two cats, six cockatiels and a rescued pigeon in an aviary. My dogs and cats primarily bring me companionship, plus fitness exercising. Many of my social hobbies revolve around the dogs including activities such as showing and agility so I guess they also help meet other people with similar interests ”  
Helen Reynolds, Dogs for the Disabled Instructor

The potential benefits of pet ownership are not only related to our physical and psychological health. They are also good for ‘breaking the ice’ between people and strengthening friendships. In scientific terms, they have been described as ‘social lubricants’ – smoothing interaction between humans.

This is particularly the case with pets that get us ‘out and about’, notably dogs (40% of dog owners say they are more likely to make friends as a result of owning a pet says Warwick University researcher Glyn Collis) but it also applies to horses and a much wider range of animals through shows and exhibitions. Indeed, all animals provide an easy topic of conversation among friends and relatives.

Various studies have shown that the presence of animals in social scenes – meetings, groups and leisure activities – leads to the interpretation of those situations as less threatening and improves the perceived character of the people associated with the animals.

In social situations, people with pets are perceived in a more positive light than people without pets and they are never regarded negatively, even by non pet owners.

In casual encounters or where there is a simple need to make conversation, pets are good, interesting conversation subjects and a safe topic between people.

When Peter Mesent of the Animal Studies Centre studied people walking a dog through a park, he found they engaged in more social activity than those who walked without one.

There are also many areas where people with a common interest in pets get together more formally – for example, through animal behaviour training or at shows and competitions. Long-lasting friendships may result.

It is estimated that 14% of owners visit dog shows, 5% participate, 5% are members of dog clubs and 9% are actually breeders.

Interestingly, there is anecdotal evidence that many owners keep in touch or even become friends with the breeder from whom they bought their pet. Some 10% of owners involve their pets with obedience training and a third are involved in other activities or events with dogs. In fact, only 3% say they are not involved in any specific activities.

When you think about it, the impact and role pets play in the way we extend our circle of friendship and acquaintance is probably considerably more than the socialising influences of most of our human friends, relations and colleagues!

## Our research says...

Almost one third of respondents said their pet helps them to make friends and meet new people

A haven where the dogs can play  
“ My breeder has become a firm friend over the years. She runs a small Bed and Breakfast for dogs and their owners in the Yorkshire countryside. It’s a real haven and we often go there for weekends so that Barney and Tess can play with their brothers and sisters ”

Lorraine Aitken, Manchester

A close-up photograph of a young girl with light brown hair and striking blue eyes. She is wearing a white collared shirt and is smiling warmly at the camera. She is holding a pug dog in her arms. The pug has a fawn-colored face with a black mask around its eyes and a black muzzle. The background is softly blurred, showing what appears to be a dog bed or a similar soft surface.

'Hero' dog keeps lost 3-year-old warm all night  
– A three-year-old lost all night in the open  
in Washington state, USA, kept warm under  
her family's dog. Searchers found Aiyana  
Picard sitting under the family's dingo, Tip.  
Search party member Skumheist Jack said:  
“A little dog popped its head up and there  
was the little girl sitting under him. That dog  
is the hero”



# Heroes and legends

Throughout history, there have always been groups of animals whose lives have been devoted to serving the human race.

Today the devotion and skill of animals who help us is widely recognised, especially those animals – usually dogs – who work tirelessly and intelligently for the disadvantaged or disabled.

Best known examples are those that work for the visually impaired (almost 5,000 dogs), the hearing impaired (about 700 dogs) or the physically disabled (250 dogs).

Less well known are the handful of dogs that work with sufferers of either Parkinson's Disease or what are known as periodic seizures.

Some people who have periodic seizures have reported that their dogs appear to be able to sense the onset of a seizure and can be taught to signal the owner of the imminent problem. Dogs working with Parkinson's sufferers have been trained to identify what is called a freezing attack. It's been discovered that if the dog touches the person's foot it breaks the freeze and he or she can then resume walking. Science cannot tell us yet how this works – only that it does.

Of course, the sniffing powers of dogs are legendary and they are in widespread security use today, notably for the detection of drugs

and explosives. But there's more. A dog in Florida has been reported to be able to detect a particular smell given off by certain skin tumours and researchers at Cambridge University are studying the use of dogs to detect an odour associated with prostate cancer in urine.

There are also animals trained to alert their owners to episodes of hypoglycaemia (low blood sugar) which allows the owner to correct the level before serious symptoms develop.

In all of these cases, owners and trainers still regard these animals primarily as pets, providing not only real help and companionship but also a large measure of independence.

History is littered with tales of the heroism of animals – or simply their remarkable intuition which has forewarned of some disaster.

There are dogs trained specifically in the skills of mountain rescue and others that specialise in retrieving people from water.

**Parrot saves flat by shrieking 'Fire'**  
A parrot saved its Russian owners' flat from being destroyed by fire when it raised the alarm.

“The parrot shrieked Fire repeatedly until neighbours heard and called the fire brigade. Firefighters arrived in time to save the apartment”

Yet others can scour collapsed buildings or dense forests in the search for victims.

There is an award scheme, The Dickens Medal, which is the animal world's equivalent of the Victoria Cross. Five dogs received the medal during World War II for their services in helping to locate and rescue bombing victims. Dogs' worst fear is fire, yet these animals braved blazing buildings in their search. Hundreds of lives were saved, thanks to them.

In many more less dramatic scenarios, animals are our heroes every day. But first and foremost, almost without exception, they are of course, our friends.

“She understands intuitively when she is needed and is very protective. My four year old is a typically boisterous boy who always gets into scrapes. Last week, Holly stopped him from doing real damage to himself when he fell off the banister – barking frantically to raise the alarm and cushioning his fall to save him”

Grant Miller, Manchester

Our research says...

Almost 40% of respondents say their pet helps them to feel secure



# A lifetime commitment

Animal companionship is a two-way relationship. Owning a pet is an important responsibility that goes beyond simply providing food and shelter to include humane treatment and proper standards of care and companionship.

The law already gives pets some protection and the RSPCA has suggested that pet owners have a duty of care which gives pets five basic freedoms:

- Freedom from hunger and thirst
- Freedom from discomfort
- Freedom from pain, injury and disease
- Freedom to express normal behaviour
- Freedom from fear and distress

It is important to choose the right pet for your lifestyle and to make sure you have enough time to meet their physical and emotional needs – plus the costs of caring properly for them. This includes providing them with the right environment – whether it's a kennel or a cage – paying for medication both for routine and specialist treatment (or insurance premiums to cover them) and meeting the cost of care if you are away from home and can't take them with you.

According to the Hertfordshire-based Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW), the welfare of animals under human care depends on the following:

- Belief in the sentience of animals (i.e. their ability to consciously sense what is going on around them)
- Understanding this is a morally important matter
- Having proper knowledge of the animal's needs
- Having the ability and resources to meet those needs
- Applying these beliefs, abilities and resources conscientiously

Animals are increasingly part of popular culture, shown in films and on TV, creating demand for specialist creatures among the general public. Animals such as owls featured in Harry Potter, or turtles featured in Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles need specialist care and are not suitable for everyone although given the correct knowledge and desire, they can make interesting pets.

In recent years, more exotic animals have become popular as pets. In particular, reptiles and tropical fish are increasing their presence in the home. Certain types of spiders and other insects are also becoming more common among those who prefer more out of the ordinary companions.

The Companion Animal Welfare Council (CAWC) is currently undertaking a review of the welfare of non-domesticated species kept as companion animals. Both the number and the range of species of animals being kept as companions appear to be increasing, it says. The needs of some species are relatively easy to meet, but caring for others to high welfare standards can present challenges

The advice to potential owners is always to make sure you know what's involved – by doing the research, reading books and if possible, speaking to a vet, reputable pet shop or other specialist.

# Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the following organisations for information links and/or material used in this publication:

American Animal Hospital Association  
[www.healthypet.com](http://www.healthypet.com)

American Pet Products Manufacturers' Association, Inc  
[www.appma.org](http://www.appma.org)

Animal Allies Humane Society  
[www.angelfire.com/mn2/animalallies](http://www.angelfire.com/mn2/animalallies)

Animal Information Network  
[www.animal-info.net](http://www.animal-info.net)

(The) Blue Cross  
An organisation for the welfare of companion animals  
[www.thebluecross.org.uk](http://www.thebluecross.org.uk)

British Veterinary Association  
[www.bva.co.uk](http://www.bva.co.uk)

Canine Partners  
[www.c-p-i.org.uk](http://www.c-p-i.org.uk)

Companion Animal Welfare Council (CAWC)  
[www.cawc.org.uk](http://www.cawc.org.uk)

Daily Telegraph  
[www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk)

Delta Society  
A leading international resource for the human-animal bond  
[www.deltasociety.org](http://www.deltasociety.org)

(The) European Pet Food Industry Association (FEDIAF)  
[www.fediaf.org](http://www.fediaf.org)

(The) Humane Community of America  
[www.saveourstrays.com](http://www.saveourstrays.com)

International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organisations (IAHAIO)  
[www.iahaio.org](http://www.iahaio.org)

Ornamental Aquatic Trade Association (OATA)  
[www.ornamentalfish.org](http://www.ornamentalfish.org)

PetEducation.com  
[www.peteducation.com](http://www.peteducation.com)

(The) Pet Food Manufacturers' Association  
[www.pfma.com](http://www.pfma.com)

Petplan  
(a member of the Cornhill Group)  
[www.petplan.co.uk](http://www.petplan.co.uk)

Pets as Therapy  
[www.pat-prodog.org.uk](http://www.pat-prodog.org.uk)

Pets for the Elderly Foundation  
[www.petsfortheelderly.org](http://www.petsfortheelderly.org)

Procter & Gamble  
[www.pg.com](http://www.pg.com)

Second Chance for Animals  
[www.secondchanceforanimals.org](http://www.secondchanceforanimals.org)

Society for Companion Animal Studies (SCAS)  
[www.scas.org.uk](http://www.scas.org.uk)  
01993 825597

Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW)  
[www.ufaw.org](http://www.ufaw.org)

University of Warwick  
[www.warwick.ac.uk](http://www.warwick.ac.uk)

Scientific and research publications, references and sources

American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis, 1984. Katcher A, Segal H, Beck A

Animal Companions and One Year Survival of Patients After Discharge from a Coronary Care Unit. Friedmann E, Katcher A H, Lynch J, Thomas S A, 1980

Animals and Cardiovascular Health. Jennings J L (Baker Medical Research Institute), 1995

Animal Assisted Therapy: Efficiency, Process and Service Standards. SCAS presentation by Prof S Ahmedzai

Benefits of Pet Ownership. Kyone M, Stafford K  
Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species. Wilson E O

Companion Animals in Human Health. Eds: Wilson C C, Turner D C

Compassion: Our Last Great Hope. Bustad L, 1996

Developing a Physiology of Inclusion: Recognizing the Health Benefits of Animal Companions. Lynch J L

Does early exposure to cat or dog protect against later allergy development? Hesselmar B et al, 1999 (In Clinical and Experimental Allergy)  
Does Pet Ownership Reduce Your Risk for Heart Disease? Delta Society, 1992

Dog Ownership and Control of Borderline Hypertension. Allen K, 2001

Dogs as Transitional Objects in the Treatment of Patients with Drug Dependency. Charnaud A B (Published by SCAS)

Effectiveness of an Animal-Assisted Therapy Program in an Inpatient Psychiatric Unit, Holcomb R, Meacham M, 1989 (Published in Anthrozoos)

Healthy Pets, Healthy People. American Pet Products Manufacturers' Association, 2000

(The) Implications of Service Animals in Health Care Settings (American Journal of Infection Control). Duncan S L, 2000

Journal of Nervous & Mental Disorders, 1983. Friedmann E, Katcher A H, Thomas S.

Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. Siegel J, 1990

Montana State University. Duncan S

New Perspectives on our Lives with Companion Animals. Eds: Katcher A H, Beck A, 1989.

People, Animals and Environment: Exploring Our Interdependence. Katcher A H, 1988

Pets as Family Members (Marriage and Family Review). Cain A O, 1985

(The) Potential Role for Pets in Child Development. Enderburg N, 2002. (Paper presented to the World Society for the Protection of Animals)

Salem State College. Eddy T J, 1996

Texas A&M University

University of Cambridge. Paul E S.

University of Cambridge Companion Animal Research Group. Serpell J (in findings published by the Delta Society, 1992 and the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine)

University of Warwick. McNicholas J, Collis G (Various papers 1999-2002)





Bedford Business Centre  
170 Mile Road  
Bedford MK42 9TW

Telephone: +44 (0)1234 273933  
Facsimile: +44 (0)1234 273550

email: [info@petcare.org.uk](mailto:info@petcare.org.uk)