

Dogs de-stress families with autistic children, new research shows

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Owning a pet dog reduces stress and significantly improves functioning in families who have a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), new research has shown.

The study, carried out by researchers at the University of Lincoln, UK, and funded by the US-based Human Animal Bond Research Initiative (HABRI) Foundation, also found a reduction in the number of dysfunctional interactions between parent and child among families which owned a dog.

Published in the *American Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, it is among the first of a number of HABRI-funded research projects which examine the effects of companion animals on human health. This project focused specifically on the effects of [pet dogs](#) on families with children with ASD.

Professor Daniel Mills, Professor of Veterinary Behavioural Medicine in the School of Life Sciences at the University of Lincoln, led the research. He said: "While there is growing evidence that animal-assisted therapy can aid in the treatment of children with autism spectrum disorders, this study is one of the first to examine how pet dog ownership can also improve the lives of those more widely affected by autism. Researchers have previously focused on the positive effects that assistance dogs can have on the child's well-being and have passed over the impact they might also have on close relatives, but our results show that owning a pet dog (rather than a specifically trained assistance dog)

can considerably improve the function of the whole family unit.

"We found a significant, positive relationship between parenting stress of the child's main caregiver and their attachment to the family dog. This highlights the importance of the bond between the carer and their dog in the benefits they gain."

The research involved families who took part in a previous study, which examined the short-term effect of a pet dog on families of a child with autism. The researchers followed up with the families two and a half years later in order to determine the longevity of the benefits of [pet ownership](#). The study demonstrated that initial results of reduced family difficulties lasted years beyond the early stages of acquiring a dog, and that stress levels continued to experience a steady decline.

"Stress associated with parenting a child with autism continued to decrease among dog owners over time, but we did not see the same reductions in families without a dog," added Professor Mills. "This long-term follow up study highlights the potential benefits of pet ownership in bringing long-term improvements to the lives of families living with a child with autism."

HABRI Executive Director Steven Feldman said: "Parents of children with autism can experience increased anxiety and stress, and now we have strong scientific evidence to show that pets can have positive effects on these quality-of-life issues. Families with an autistic child should consider pet ownership as a way to improve [family](#) harmony."

The study at Lincoln is one of a series of research projects from a major body of work carried out at the University of Lincoln's School of Life Sciences which sheds light on the benefits that pet dogs can bring to children with ASD and their families.

More information: Sophie S. Hall et al. The long-term benefits of dog ownership in families with children with autism, *Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Applications and Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jveb.2016.04.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jveb.2016.04.003)

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