

Dog walking creates social bonds within communities, research finds

March 4 2022, by Megan Mueller



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Companion animals are a core part of family life in the United States, with [90 million American households](#) having at least one pet. Many of us view pets as beloved family members who provide nonjudgmental [emotional support and companionship during times of stress](#).

That's not all. Research shows our pets can also strengthen our relationships and [trust](#) with other people. In addition, pets contribute positively to trust in our broader social communities.

Companion animals as social facilitators

As many of us know, [animals](#) provide an avenue for approaching another person socially, serving as a conversational starting point for connection. Pet ownership alone could be a source of shared interest and knowledge, even among people who may not have similar interests otherwise.

Simply walking down the street with a dog can lead to [significantly more social interactions](#) than walking without a dog. Assistance dogs can also facilitate these interactions. One study found that individuals using a wheelchair were more likely to be approached when their [assistance animal was present](#).

The presence of an animal can also enhance perceptions of trustworthiness and responsibility, which in turn fosters positive social interactions. Researchers found that people were [more likely to help a stranger with a dog](#) than one without a dog, suggesting that the presence of an animal conferred perceptions of trust.

For children, interacting with a pet can also provide an additional opportunity to practice positive social interactions and [develop empathy](#) and [compassion](#). Recent research indicates that living with [dogs](#) is associated with [better social and emotional skills for children](#). In our own research at the [Tufts Pets and Well-Being Lab](#), we also found that teenagers with high levels of attachment to their pets were likely to have higher [levels of social skills and empathy toward others](#) than those without such attachments.

Pets and social capital

Pets have also been shown to foster social capital in communities. [Social capital](#) is a concept that encompasses the broader community and neighborhood networks of social relationships, and the degree to which the community has a culture of helping others. The trust inherent in these connections can [lead to better health and well-being](#).

Interestingly, [pet owners](#) have consistently reported [higher levels of social capital in their communities than people without pets](#), both in the United States and internationally.

In addition to social facilitation, pets can contribute to [social capital](#) by strengthening social trust within communities. Neighbors may rely on one another to assist with animal care, [which builds reciprocal trust](#). Pet owners' use of shared spaces, such as dog parks or green spaces, can lead to better social relationships.

In spite of it, during the COVID-19 pandemic [dog owners were more likely than those without dogs to go for regular walks outdoors](#), providing an opportunity for community engagement during a period of extreme social isolation. The presence of an animal has even been found to [increase positive social interactions in the workplace](#).

While evidence continues to support the idea that pets foster positive interactions between people, animals are not a universal solution for creating trust. There is still a lot we need to learn about the interrelated relationships between pets and people.

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