

# The Pet Report

2015

*The importance of pet ownership in childhood*



**pets**  
at home



# Welcome

After getting such a positive response to our first Pet Report last year, we decided to do it again – after all, our pets are central to our lives, year in, year out. It's well known that we're a nation of animal lovers, and it's great to see that we're passing this passion on to our children – so it seemed natural this year for us to look at our relationship with pets during childhood.

Pets can have a big impact on families' lives, and they can help children to learn a whole variety of skills. Add to those the emotional benefits, behavioural improvements and health advantages that the presence of an animal can bring, and it becomes clear that pets can have a lasting effect on our children.

At Pets at Home, we've witnessed a change in the types of pet we're keeping as families, as our lives become more hectic; it's great to see, in this detailed report, the range of animals our children now have as pets.

When choosing a family pet for the first time, there are so many questions to be considered – for example, what type of pet to purchase, where to get it from, and how having a pet will benefit the younger members of the family. So, within this report we've enlisted the help of our experts at Pets at Home as well as speaking to a variety of specialists, including psychologists and leading charities, to help you.

There's no doubt that pets can be good for families; read on to find out how!

Best wishes

Dr Maeve Moorcroft MVB MRCVS

HEAD OF PETS, PETS AT HOME

## CONTENTS



P3 Section 1  
PETS AND CHILDHOOD



P11 Section 2  
PETS AND HEALTH



P18 Section 3  
PETS AND BEHAVIOUR



P25 Section 4  
PETS AND EDUCATION



P33 Section 5  
FINDING A PET

SECTION 1

# *Pets and childhood*

How our pets help us  
to learn life's lessons





# The role of pets in the modern family

Evidence of the positive benefits of pet ownership continues to grow, particularly among children who are now caring for family pets at an increasingly young age

Humans have kept animals as companions for thousands of years – longer, in fact, than was first imagined. In 2011, the discovery of a canine skull in Siberia revealed that dogs had been kept as domesticated animals for some 33,000 years<sup>1</sup> – shortly before the peak of the last ice age.

Today, almost half of all UK households (around 12 million) have pets, with a pet population of around 58 million, according to the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association's Pet Population Report<sup>2</sup> in 2015.

But what is particularly interesting is that the desire to own a pet passes from generation to generation. New research<sup>3</sup> commissioned by Pets at Home has revealed that 93 per cent of UK adults who currently own pets also grew up with pets. For most of today's adult pet owners, the pet they were most likely to have first provided day-to-day care for was a dog (40 per cent) or a cat (22 per cent) – unlike their own children, who are now taking responsibility for more manageably-sized creatures. Goldfish, guinea pigs or hamsters are all more popular choices among today's children.

"Typically, there are five reasons why people tend to own pets," says Professor Lance Workman, a psychologist from the University of South Wales whose previous research has explored different

aspects of animal behaviour. "A source of comfort comes high on the list, along with the fact that pets are aesthetically pleasing. They are also a valuable means of social interaction – if you have a pet, people are more likely to visit you, or to talk to you in public, and past research has revealed that more than half of the British public think that dog owners are friendlier than non-dog owners. The final reasons are security and as a status symbol. To my mind, the latter is not the best reason to keep a pet but people do."

Certainly Pets at Home's research discovered that keeping a pet increases your chances of happiness during childhood – particularly if you choose a dog. Of the 2,438 respondents who had owned both a cat and a dog, 65 per cent claimed that dogs had brought them most happiness overall, and 54 per cent believed that dogs had brought them most happiness as a child.

"Studies have shown that if you've got a cat or a dog in the house, it boosts the production of 'feel-good' serotonin and dopamine," says Professor Workman. "Serotonin is released when we feel happy and content, and dopamine is released when we anticipate a reward. One lab study also discovered that people can stave off the negative feelings associated with social rejection simply by thinking about their pet. So pets may serve »





PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY

*“Pets are a valuable means of social interaction  
— if you have a pet, people are more likely to visit you”*



## Pets at Home’s vet, Dr Maeve Moorcroft, on the life lessons pets can teach us in childhood

The passion for pet ownership spans every generation. Pet owners of all ages come through our doors at Pets at Home – people love to interact with pets and there is no age limit to that enjoyment.

In our survey, it was interesting to see that younger children are caring for pets on a daily basis. My sons, aged seven and 10, help me to look after our cat, dogs and chickens, and I try very hard to teach them how to look after our pets responsibly, so they are fully aware of the work and commitment involved.

Obviously, there always needs to be an adult in a supervisory role to ensure the pet’s welfare is protected, but allowing children to become involved could help to teach them compassion and responsibility towards others. It could also help children to develop a balanced self-esteem, which reduces excessive self-focus.

“Allowing children to become involved in looking after pets helps to teach them compassion and responsibility towards others”

One of the great things about a childhood pet is the strong bond that can develop. You can turn to them for comfort when you are upset or frightened, and the pet will never tease you or laugh at you or reveal your secrets – we all know how tough sibling rivalry can be! There will be no fights with your pets – just fun times and cuddles or walks and endless ball throwing. I know my own childhood pets definitely helped to create positive childhood memories.

Finally, it’s important that parents communicate to their children the five welfare needs of the family pet. These are: a safe and suitable place to live; a proper diet, including fresh water; the ability to express normal behaviour; housing with, or apart from, other animals as required; and protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease. If parents get these points across to their children, they are doing a good job.

as a sort of social resource for their owners, too.”

In Pets at Home’s survey<sup>3</sup>, children younger than five are being given responsibility for the day-to-day care of pets, with the average age being 7.5 – a year younger than their parents. Interestingly, responsibility for a pet is seldom taken on during the teenage years – perhaps teenagers really do have too many other distractions!

“I firmly believe that pets provide an invaluable taster for adult life,” says Professor Workman. “If you care for a pet, this helps you to develop compassion, and to realise that you have a responsibility towards others. And later on in life, we can transfer those skills to our relationships with friends and partners.”

Mark Smith, pet and reptile operations manager at Pets at Home, agrees. “Having pets from a young age could predispose you to be more kindly towards animals as you grow older, and there is evidence<sup>4</sup> that children who are brought up in households with pets have a greater empathy with their peer group, too.”

In households where the pet provides a child’s primary source of companionship, there is a fear that the child may lack social skills. “This is a misconception,” says Professor Workman. “Evidence exists that shows the opposite is actually true. People with pets are more likely to be sociable than those who don’t have pets, and they’re viewed as more sociable, too. One reason for this is because it’s part of human nature to be interested in animals – if you look at our evolutionary history, we needed to know and understand how animals functioned in order for us to survive.

“In my experience, knowing that you have to be gentle with animals is almost innate, and happens even among very young children,” adds Smith. “It’s not something you necessarily have to teach them.”

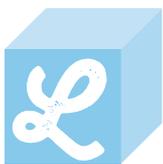
PHOTOGRAPHY: MATTHEW STANSFIELD

Sources: **1.** ‘A 33,000-Year-Old Incipient Dog from the Altai Mountains of Siberia: Evidence of the Earliest Domestication Disrupted by the Last Glacial Maximum’, Nikolai D Ovodov et al, Plos One, July 2011 **2.** PFMA Pet Population Report 2015 **3.** Survey conducted by Mustard Research on behalf of Pets at Home, June 2015 (sample: 4321) **4.** *Why the Wild Things Are: Animals in the Lives of Children* by Gail F Melson, Harvard University Press, 2005.



# Life's great companions

Lynn firmly believes that pets are playing a vital role in the development of her children, helping them to understand the fundamental lessons of life



Lynn, a mum of three, is more than aware of how important pets are to children. Sharing a home with

pets from an early age taught Lynn about how to respect others. It's something she was determined to teach her own children. "Pets are great when it comes to teaching children life's important lessons. They must handle them gently, tend to their needs, and learn not to disturb them when they're eating or sleeping. That goes for all of our pets. Even the fish! All animals get respect in this house."

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID HARRISON

Currently, Lynn and the children – Alfie, 15, Harvey, 13, and 10-year-old Matilda – are the owners of Stanley, an 11-month-old Boston terrier, three cats, Ted, Lulu and Denzel, five fish who are all called Bob (or the Fish Family Bob), and Ben, the dwarf hamster.

So how does Lynn think having pets helps her children learn about life? "Pets are crucial to developing basic concepts of life, death and responsibility.

Many a child's first encounter of death is with a pet. I don't mean to trivialise it and say that a pet's death is not important and upsetting, but it does teach kids about the big fundamental stages of life.

"We had a stray cat called Knickers, and when she passed away, the whole street went into

**"Pets are crucial to developing basic concepts of life, death and responsibility"**

mourning! My sons, Alfie and Harvey, were extremely upset, and Matilda wrote Knickers a letter, which was buried with her. I had just lost my mother as well at that time. My husband was burying Knickers in a shoebox in the garden and Matilda asked, ‘Mum, was Nanna Peg buried in a shoe box, too?’ So although she got it a bit wrong, all three kids understood the fundamental meaning of death and had a conversation about death and loss.”

The Pets at Home’s Pet Report survey\* has found that when it comes to pet ownership, today’s children are deemed more responsible than their parents were when they were children. The average age for children to provide day-to-day care of their pet is now seven and a half, compared with eight and a half a generation ago.

Ben the dwarf hamster is the sole responsibility of Matilda. “Looking after Ben has shown Matilda how to look after others,” says Lynn. “Caring for pets requires

compassion and empathy, and having pets has helped to develop these emotions in my children.”

It’s easy to spill your heart out to your pet, and Lynn is certain that their pets help Matilda when she’s sad or upset. “The pets are a great comfort to her when she’s in a



mood or upset about something. She’ll go and chat to Ben her hamster, or curl up on the sofa or on her bed with the cats and dog and I can hear her talking to them, getting whatever is bothering her off her chest.

Spending time with their animals has a therapeutic affect on all three children.”

So, does Lynn have to encourage her kids to look after their pets responsibly? “Oh not at all, they are all very engaged. All

three children share the responsibility of walking Stanley and feeding the fish. But I have the task of feeding the three cats. We all like to look after all the pets in one way or another. What’s the point of having a pet if you don’t care for it yourself and love it?”



## Profile

Names: Alfie, 15, Harvey, 13, and Matilda, 10  
 Pets: Stanley, an 11-month-old Boston terrier, three cats, Ted, Lulu (who, they discovered six months ago, is really a boy!) and Denzel, five fish (all called Bob, or the Fish Family Bob), and Ben, the dwarf hamster.



SCAN HERE TO WATCH OUR VIDEO OF LYNN AND MATILDA



**“Spending time with their animals has a therapeutic affect on all three children”**

# Pets & childhood

The latest survey† from Pets at Home shows changing trends among UK pet owners, from the types of pets we are now choosing, to the reasons why we choose them

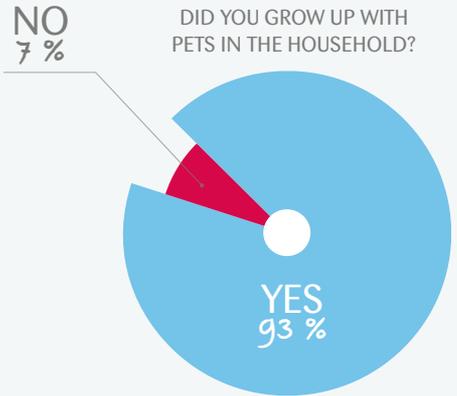
**T**he type of pets we choose is changing, along with our approach to looking after them. Modern pet keeping is about attending to a species' needs in order to keep them healthy and happy. In turn, knowing that you are doing a good job enhances your own sense of wellbeing.

Reassuringly, today's pet owners are making more considered decisions when sourcing and selecting a family pet. Some 93 per cent of the survey's adult respondents grew up with a pet, and when they were children, 25 per cent of all pets were acquired through

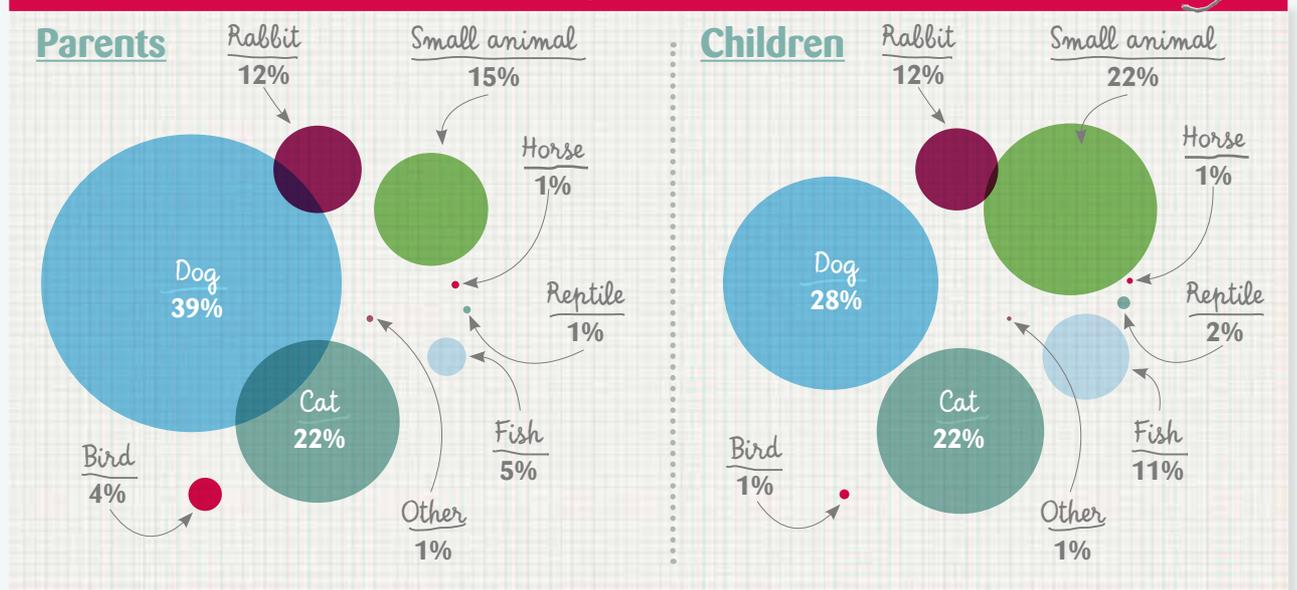
'someone they know'. This has fallen to 15 per cent, and today, 42 per cent of all pets come from pet shops.

Caged birds have declined in popularity – children are now almost three times as likely to be caring for a dwarf hamster as they are for a bird – while keeping fish is now more popular.

Dogs remain the most popular pet for children, with the UK's top breeds being Labrador, Jack Russell and Staffordshire bull terrier.\* However, the research (below) shows that children today are less likely than their parents to be responsible for looking after a dog as their first pet.



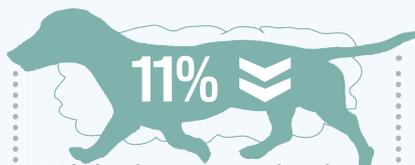
## The first pet that owners cared for when they were children vs those their children care for



We're **No 2**



Small animals\*\* have become the second most common type of pet that children take care of.



While dog ownership has declined, more children have small furrries and fish as first pets.

Fish have grown in popularity, with twice as many children today taking care of fish compared with when their parents were children.

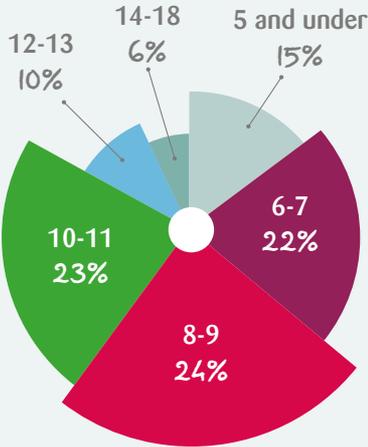


\*EXCEPT WHERE INDICATED, SOURCE: SURVEY CONDUCTED BY MUSTARO RESEARCH ON BEHALF OF PETS AT HOME, JUNE 2015 (SAMPLE: 4321); \*\*SOURCE: BBC.CO.UK/NEWS/UK-ENGLAND-27690167; †GUINEA PIG, HAMSTER, GERBIL ETC

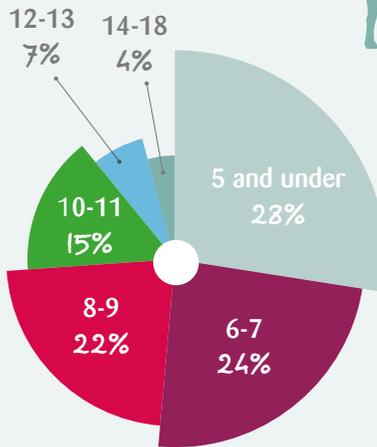
# Pet popularity through childhood and beyond†

The age of pet owners when they began daily pet care vs the age that their children began pet care

## Parents



## Children



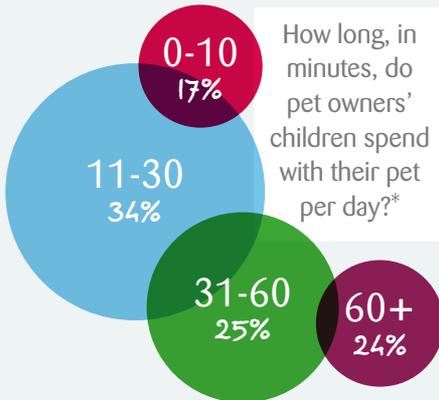
**15%**

first performed the day-to-day care aged 5 or under



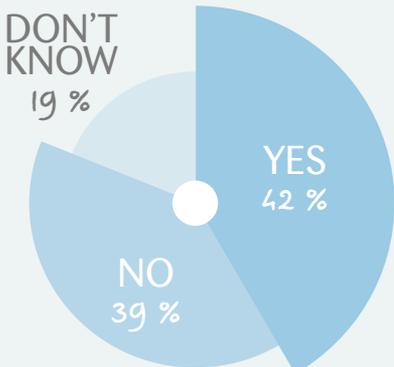
**7.5 years**

IS THE AVERAGE AGE TODAY'S CHILDREN BEGIN CARING FOR A PET



How long, in minutes, do pet owners' children spend with their pet per day?\*

Do children ever have more fun playing with their pets than they do with siblings or friends?\*



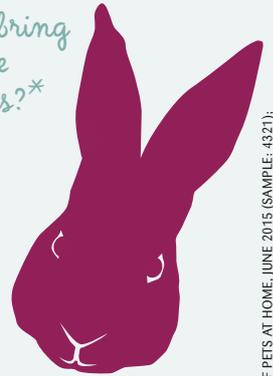
## Top 5

Which pets do/would bring most enjoyment to the children of pet owners?\*



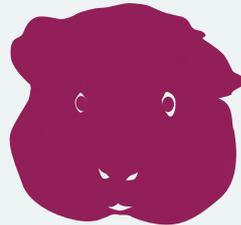
### 4. Guinea pig

They have specific dietary and housing needs but guinea pigs make good first pets for children.



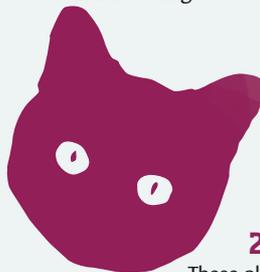
### 3. Rabbit

Give them a large living space, plenty of exercise and the company of one or more compatible neutered bunny friends.



### 5. Chinchilla

These shy but highly social rodents are clean, quiet and most active in the evening.



### 2. Cat

These playful pets are enormous fun, so it's no surprise they are the second most popular choice.



**No 1**

### 1. Dog

Comfortably in the top spot, dogs need a lot of looking after – but they're well worth it.

†EXCEPT WHERE INDICATED, SOURCE: SURVEY CONDUCTED BY MUSTARD RESEARCH ON BEHALF OF PETS AT HOME, JUNE 2015 (SAMPLE: 4321); \*SOURCE: CHILDREN AND PETS SURVEY CONDUCTED BY ONE POLL ON BEHALF OF HAVAS, JUNE 2015 (SAMPLE: 2000)

SECTION 2

*Pets and  
health*

How our pets help to  
keep us alert and active





# Owning a pet could be good for your child's health

A number of recent studies have shown that owning a pet could lead to a variety of physical health benefits for children, including lowering the risk of childhood obesity and improving allergies

In the UK, we're a nation of dog lovers. From chihuahuas to Irish wolfhounds, our canine friends are the most popular pet – with about 8.5 million<sup>1</sup> owned – and are more often than not seen as a member of the family (sometimes even the favourite).

But, in addition to providing us with their love and affection, do dogs also give something back in terms of physical health benefits? And are these perks also seen in children?

Dr Carri Westgarth, Epidemiology and Population Health researcher at the University of Liverpool, certainly thinks so. “Generally, when looking at the population as a whole, if you own a dog you are more physically active,” she said. “And this goes for children as well, in terms of increased physical activity levels.”

She cites walking the dog and, for children, having free playtime with their four-legged friends as reasons why there is a clear correlation between dog ownership and improved fitness; a trend that isn't seen in any other type of pet, signifying that pooches may be a bit special.

This is a trend that was also seen in a survey<sup>2</sup> commissioned by Pets at Home into the benefits to children's health of owning an animal – four out of five owners believe that having a dog has made at least one

member of their household more fit and active in the last 12 months, with 11 per cent of parents believing their child has lost weight as a result.

This has been reinforced by research<sup>3</sup> from St George's, University of London, which highlighted that owning a dog could help to lower the risk of childhood obesity. The study found that children in dog-owning families took part in more physical exercise and were less sedentary.

Dr Westgarth did, however, stress that, just because you own a dog, it doesn't automatically guarantee improved physical health for you and your children. “There is a clause in there that you have to walk your dog,” she added. “There is still a proportion of people who don't – with maybe someone else in the family walking the dog – so that person won't be getting the physical benefits.”

She went on to add that in a study<sup>4</sup> she did with about 8,000 schoolchildren, there was no association between dog ownership and childhood obesity; explaining that “it is more complex than just physical activity – it's a lot about nutrition as well, with pet ownership just one factor.”

Owning a pet could also have other health benefits



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY

*"If you own a dog you are more physically active, and this goes for children as well."*



## Pets at Home's Mark Smith on why having a pet can be beneficial for your children

for you and your children. Studies<sup>5</sup> have found that exposure to dogs could also improve allergies and asthma, while the Pet Health Council has reported<sup>6</sup> findings demonstrating that children who live with a cat or dog in the first years of life have a lower incidence of hay fever and asthma, and are also less likely to develop animal-related allergies.

This research matches the findings of the study commissioned by Pets at Home<sup>2</sup>, which show that more than a quarter (26.6 per cent) of parents think that their child has grown up with fewer allergies as a result of having a pet, and 31.6 per cent of them believe that their child's allergies have shown an improvement since owning an animal.

Dr Westgarth commented that, like the physical benefits, it comes down to certain specifics – different pets affect different allergies. “The types of allergies that are associated with atopy – having an allergic reaction on the skin as well as breathing difficulties – are shown to be improved by dogs and cats.”

Despite this good news, she said that other animals, such as small furrries, could actually increase the affects of allergies, but there is no clear evidence as to why. “My answer is it always depends,” she concluded. “It could be the sort of dust you get in the environment if you look after a hamster or a rabbit because of the sawdust and hay, but the research just hasn't been done to that level of detail.”

Whatever the case, it is clear that owning certain pets, such as cats and dogs, could have some amazing health benefits in addition to the love and company that they already provide.

There are many perks to having pets around your children when they're growing up. Not only does it help to boost their understanding and appreciation of pets and nature, but, if they take on certain responsibilities, it can also lead to health benefits, too.

Our survey<sup>2</sup> showed that six out of 10 children did exercise with their pets, be it playing with them or, if it was a dog, taking them out for a walk. This is a level of activity that wouldn't necessarily happen if the family home didn't have a pet, and you can therefore come to the conclusion that by owning a pooch you're helping your children stay fit and healthy.

**“Our survey showed that six out of 10 children did exercise with their pets, be it playing with them or, if it was a dog, taking them out for a walk”**

But you do have to encourage your children to take an interest in the family pet for them to really see any health benefits – with studies<sup>3</sup> showing that the more attached you are to your dog, the more likely you are to walk it and as a result get the exercise.

It's not just dogs that are great pets to have, though – even if they were top of our survey's wish list.

In addition, there are also studies<sup>5</sup> that show that children who grow up around pets are less prone to allergies later in life. I myself own a whole host of animals – from a dog and two cats, to a snake – and I think it's a great environment for my own two-year-old to be growing up in. She will hopefully get the benefits of growing up around animals, leaving her less likely to develop allergies and asthma for the rest of her life.

So there you have it. Pets are a brilliant way to get your children outside into the fresh air, and they could also boost their immune system and reduce allergies.

Sources: **1.** PFMA pet population report 2015 **2.** Survey conducted by Mustard Research on behalf of Pets at Home, June 2015 (sample: 4321) **3.** [sgul.ac.uk/news/news-archive/man-s-best-friend-keeps-children-on-the-move](http://sgul.ac.uk/news/news-archive/man-s-best-friend-keeps-children-on-the-move) **4.** 'Is childhood obesity influenced by dog ownership? No cross-sectional or longitudinal evidence', *Obesity Facts: The European Journal of Obesity*, Cari Westgarth et al, December 8, 2012 **5.** 'Evolution of research into the mutual benefits of human-animal interaction', Sandra McCune et al, *Animal Frontiers*, 4 (3) 2014 **6.** 'The benefits of pet ownership for children' The Pet Health Council.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MATTHEW STANSFIELD

# Pets & health

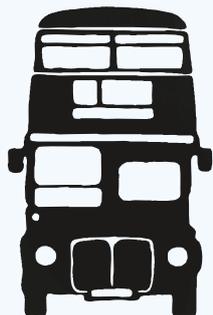
There are many ways in which pets have a positive impact on our lives, including our physical wellbeing<sup>†</sup>. They are helping to keep parents and children active and could even help us to lose weight

**66%**



of dog and horse owners say their pet has helped them to be more active.

## How pets are helping us to stay active



In the past **12 months**, pet owners in the UK have collectively lost an estimated **4 million stones** of weight thanks to the increased activity that comes with owning a pet.

**2,000**

That's equal to 2,000 double-decker buses

**36%**

of pet owners say that having a pet has helped them to lose weight.

### FACT

For someone who weighs 70kg (11 stone), walking the dog will burn about 280 calories per hour.  
240kcal = 45g chocolate bar

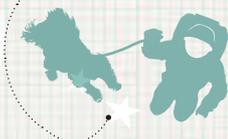


### MOONWALKING

On average, UK dogs are walked 7.5 hours per week.

If the nation's 8.5 million dogs\* are walked at 3mph, that means...

... the distance covered in a week is equal to going to the moon and back 400 times.



### SADDLE UP!

Horse owners spend on average nearly 6 hours per week riding.



Nearly half (46%) of UK parents surveyed believe that their children are fitter and more active because they own a dog or horse.

What pet owners surveyed claim to have lost in weight in the past 12 months thanks to their pets:

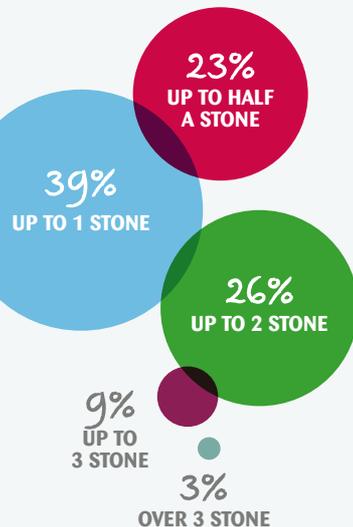
And it's not just our fitness that could benefit from owning a pet...

**27%**

of parents surveyed think that their child has grown up with fewer allergies as a result of having a pet.

**32%**

of parents surveyed think that their child's allergies have improved since owning a pet.



\*EXCEPT WHERE INDICATED, SOURCE: SURVEY CONDUCTED BY MUSTARD RESEARCH ON BEHALF OF PETS AT HOME, JUNE 2015 (SAMPLE: 4321); †SOURCE: PFMA PET POPULATION REPORT 2015



# Tilly keeps the whole family active

In an age where more and more children are spending their free time indoors looking at a screen of some kind, pets are an enormous incentive to get them outdoors and moving.

Erin, Ethan and Lewis Hamilton from Derby don their running shoes and explain how their dog, Tilly, has helped to keep them all healthy and happy as a family



The Hamilton family have always had a house full of pets, but long work hours and 11-year-old

Ethan's cat allergies meant their initial choice of pet was limited. "We got Daisy the tortoise as I heard that they were great pets for kids with allergies," says mum Rona. "She was the ideal choice and Erin and Lewis love her, too. The same goes for our fish!" But it wasn't until they welcomed Tilly, a Cavalier King Charles spaniel, into their lives three years ago that the family really started to see a huge difference in all three children's fitness and wellbeing.

"When all my friends go home after school to play on their games consoles, we just think, we have one of those too, but why do you

need a PlayStation when you have a dog?” asks Ethan. “They are just as much fun, if not more so. And better for your health.”

Ever since she was a puppy, Tilly has been very playful, which encourages all of the Hamiltons to take part in more active outdoor pursuits as a family. “She is like our own little personal fitness coach,” laughs Ethan.

Ethan’s eight-year-old sister, Erin, nods enthusiastically in agreement. “When we go for a walk, Tilly keeps us moving. At the end of the day, all of us are worn out! Tilly makes us go out more as family. Before we had her, we’d just stay inside and do stuff rather than go outside and play, but now, thanks to our dog, it’s the other way round!”

Ethan agrees. “Tilly is the missing link in our family and she has brought us all together,” he



says. Ethan’s 14-year-old brother, Lewis, is certainly glad of Tilly’s company. He has always been a keen runner, and Tilly has been helping him keep fit, joining him on training sessions.

“Even if it is snowing or bucketing down with rain, I still take the dog out regardless,” says Lewis. “She needs her exercise

## “Tilly is like our very own little personal fitness coach!”

and to go to the loo. She is my incentive to go out for a run, whatever the weather. If it wasn’t for Tilly, I probably wouldn’t bother going for a run in bad weather. So she gets her walk and I get my run, which helps me to get fitter. She is great off the lead, too, so she gets to run free and is not limited to my running speed.”

Tilly has also made training a lot more fun for Lewis. “I used to run with some of my school friends, but during the summer holidays, I have no one to run with,” he says. “But now I have a running partner, which helps me to challenge myself. It encourages me to go out a lot more than I would if we didn’t have a dog. I think I am healthier as a result of having Tilly.”

Thanks to their pet, the family visit the park more often and even have day trips out as a family that involve long walks.

“Our gran lives on a farm in the countryside in Yorkshire,” says Erin. “It’s great fun. We take Tilly on very long walks – she loves it there. Before, we had Tilly, we’d turn around for home after a mile or so, but Tilly encourages us to go further!”

Ethan thinks that walking the dog is one of the best things you can do in your free time. “When you tell people you’re going for a walk, they say, ‘Oh how boring, you could be doing



something fun like bowling’, but I don’t agree. I mean, what could be better than having a dog to play with and take for long walks?”

Lewis believes having Tilly has been good for the wellbeing of the whole family. “We wouldn’t be as healthy as a family if we didn’t have Tilly, as we would probably do other less active, indoor things like watching films,” he says. “We love going for walks. It is so good for us, and Tilly loves it, too.”

Erin has the last word. “We all agree that it’s a delight to have Tilly in our lives.”

### Profile

Names: Erin, 8, Ethan, 11, and Lewis, 14  
 Pets: Daisy the tortoise, who they all love but doesn’t run very fast! That job goes to Tilly the Cavalier King Charles spaniel who keeps the children on their toes! They also keep fish.

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEPHANIE RUSHTON



SCAN HERE TO WATCH OUR VIDEO OF ERIN, ETHAN AND LEWIS



A young boy with short brown hair is shown in profile, looking down. A bearded dragon lizard is perched on his shoulder. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with greenery.

SECTION 3

# *Pets and behaviour*

The role of pets in  
childhood development



# How pets can help children learn

Pets could help children improve their concentration in class and their behaviour at home, according to new research

**T**he presence of a pet could have a significant positive impact on a child. For children, a pet can be someone to talk to, to find comfort with and to care for. Pets could also help children to mature, as caring for an animal helps a child understand about responsibility and structure.

## PETS IN THE HOME

According to a recent study commissioned by Pets At Home<sup>1</sup>, four out of five parents believe that the presence of a pet in the home has had a positive impact on their child's development, with 58 per cent saying that owning a pet has made their child become more responsible and 26 per cent saying that it has helped to improve their child's general behaviour.

The study also discovered that the death of a pet helped them come to terms with a family member or friend passing away. A third of parents said that the death of a pet helped children understand the death of a person they knew, with 71 per cent of families having experienced the death of a beloved animal.

Pets could also help children improve their social skills, according to the Pet Health Council, which reported<sup>2</sup> that children who own pets are often less self-centred than those who don't.

## PETS AND LEARNING

The presence of an animal in a room can not only help children concentrate and learn, but also help them

overcome their anxiety, according to recent research<sup>3</sup>. In one set of studies, children were able to perform tasks faster with a dog present, without making any more mistakes. They also made fewer errors in another challenge they were set. In another study, children gave their teacher more attention during lessons when a dog was in the classroom. Children may also find it easier to read aloud with a dog in the room, other research found, as the animal helped them overcome their anxiety.

Pets As Therapy's Read2Dogs scheme helps thousands of children a week by encouraging them to read to our canine friends.

"Many children seem naturally comfortable in the presence of dogs," observes the CEO of Pets As Therapy, Cheryl Tissot. "Parents and teachers can use this special relationship to enhance literacy skills and encourage reading in a relaxed environment, with dog and child sitting together.

"This contact between dog and child encourages physical interaction, which helps to put the child at ease. The dog acts as a non-judgemental listener and offers comfort to the child who may find reading difficult or stressful."

## HELPING CHILDREN OVERCOME CHALLENGES

Children with learning and behavioural difficulties can often find it challenging to connect with classmates, teachers and even their parents. However, studies have shown that with the influence of a pet, whether





PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY; MATTHEW STANSFIELD



## Pets at Home's Mark Smith on how pets can help children to learn about responsibility

at home or in the classroom, children who find it difficult to interact socially with other people can make a considerable improvement – both in their social skills and their concentration at school.

In a study on the effects of owning a pet on children who were on the autistic spectrum<sup>4</sup>, 51.8 per cent of parents said that their child was more interested in attending school while there were guinea pigs in the classroom. At the end of the programme, just under half of the guinea pigs were adopted by parents to keep their children company and to help continue their development.

“Animal assisted therapy can be used by teachers, Sencos [special educational needs coordinators], speech and language therapists and psychologists to benefit a child’s physical, emotional and psychosocial health, cognitive function and communication skills,” says Tissot. “Interaction with our PAT dogs is proven to reduce stress and anxiety, and encourages confidence.”

The Pets at Home study<sup>1</sup>, meanwhile, revealed that owning a pet could improve the attitude of children with behavioural difficulties: nearly two-thirds (66.4 per cent) of parents believed that owning a pet has helped to improve their child’s behavioural issues.

Pets can have a powerful influence on children. Even just the presence of a dog or a guinea pig in the class could help children get excited about school and focus during their lessons. But interacting with an animal on a regular basis could have an even bigger impact, as children with pets often learn about responsibility, grief and social interaction earlier than their peers.

Sources: **1.** Survey conducted by Mustard Research on behalf of Pets At Home, June 2015 (sample: 4321) **2.** ‘Health Benefits of Pets’, Pet Health Council, 2007 **3.** ‘Evolution of research into the mutual benefits of human-animal interaction’, Sandra McCune et al, *Animal Frontiers*, 4 (3) 2014 **4.** ‘Effects of Classroom Animal-Assisted Activities on Social Functioning in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder’, Marguerite E O’Haire et al *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 20 (3), 2014 **5.** Children and Pets Survey conducted by One Poll on behalf of Havas, June 2015 (sample: 2,000) **6.** *Why the Wild Things Are: Animals in the Lives of Children* by Gail F Melson, Harvard University Press, 2005.

Parents understand that having a pet can give children a sense of responsibility, even give brothers and sisters a shared sense of responsibility – the statistics show that children say that they prefer their pets to their siblings, but in reality that’s just sibling rivalry.

For parents, one of the most important things to do when your child asks for a pet is to involve them with the decision. Get them to do research about the pets they might like – attending one of our half term workshops could help them learn about the responsibility of caring for a pet.

Mum and dad should also drive the idea that pets must be cared for, that a dog (and of course any pet) is not just for Christmas. People often come into our stores having already done a lot of research to know how much time they will need to spend caring for each animal. For example, even within the small furry category, a pygmy hedgehog actually needs very different care compared with a hamster or a guinea pig.

“Children who grow up in a household with pets, taking on some of the responsibilities of looking after them, have a higher degree of empathy with their peers”

Giving this care can have a positive effect on children. Research<sup>6</sup> shows that children who grow up in a household with pets, taking on some of the responsibilities of looking after them, have a higher degree of empathy with their peers.

A pet is the first introduction a child gets to caring for something else. Helping mum and dad clean out fish tanks or vivariums shows that they understand that a pet is not just a plaything that lives in the house, it’s a living creature that needs to be looked after. They learn to appreciate that other people and other animals have needs, and you have to look after them. It’s not just all about focusing on themselves.



# Crunch time helps Jack to progress

Sometimes pets can reach out to a child in a way that no adult ever can. For 12-year-old Jack, and his foster carers Ann and Denis Dobson, bringing a bearded dragon called Crunch into their home turned out to be a life-changer



When Jack arrived at the Northumberland home of foster carers, Ann and Denis Dobson, in

September 2014, he was in a tricky situation. He had already lived with several other carers, he was regularly absconding from school and he was a very angry young man. Right away, Ann and Denis could envisage a place in their home for this troubled child, but Jack found it hard to see a happy future for himself.

“Jack was very challenging,” remembers Ann. “He didn’t trust anyone – not even kids of his own age. A year on, I’m surprised that our relationship with him is so positive because he pushed us to the limit. But we were able to see past his behaviour to the real Jack inside.”

Early on in Jack’s placement with Ann and Denis, he asked if he could have a lizard – a pet he had wanted to keep since he was



a little boy. Allowing children in foster care to keep a pet is not straightforward and Ann and Denis had to get special permission before they could consider Jack's request.

"I wasn't very keen on the idea, I have to admit," says Ann. "I was focusing on the practical issues, and I had to be sure that Jack was fully committed to the idea."

So Ann and Denis made an agreement with Jack. If he settled down at school, and if his foster placement continued to go well, then he could have a pet. "But we were very clear that the lizard would be his responsibility and that he had to save up and pay for it himself," adds Ann. "By the end of October 2014, he'd really settled down, he'd done plenty of research into caring for lizards, and he'd saved up quite a lot of money, so we said yes. We visited a local specialist and the owner suggested a bearded

dragon. He also gave Jack lots of useful advice."

Crunch settled into a vivarium in Jack's bedroom when he was eight weeks old, and the two soon became close friends.

"He was really tiny when I got him," explains Jack. "I chose him because he was the one jumping around in the tank – I wanted a pet that looked lively and naughty! I wanted to call him Henry at first because I thought that would be quite funny. Then I changed my mind and called him Crunch."

Jack has since taken on full responsibility for Crunch, including preparing his favourite vegetables, and he handles his pet every day.

## “Crunch has brought out a softer, more caring side in Jack”

"As soon as I wake up, I put on his lights and his heat lamp, and I check the thermometer on his vivarium to make sure he's warm enough," says Jack. "I talk to him every morning, too. Sometimes, he looks at me as if I'm a bit weird, and then he runs around my bed! And when I come home from school, he lies on my chest, or sits on my shoulder, when I'm watching TV or playing with my phone."

According to Ann, keeping Crunch has given Jack a much-needed focus and a sense of belonging. "Crunch has brought out a softer, more caring side in Jack," she says. "From the beginning of his placement, he was always very gentle with our dogs

Dexter, Lexi and Archie, and he's very caring towards Crunch, too."

As Ann points out, a foster carer's job is to provide a normal life for the children in their care, and looking after a pet is a typical part of normal family life. "Jack saw that we took his request for a pet seriously, and it helped to strengthen his trust in us," she says.

Since having Crunch, Jack's behaviour has changed dramatically – a transformation that he is happy to acknowledge himself. "Crunch has helped to calm me down," he says. "When I got him, I knew that if I got kicked out of school, Crunch would have to go and live with another family. So I became less naughty and I stopped getting into trouble.

"I've always wanted an unusual pet – something that the other kids don't have – and Crunch makes me feel special. I also like the idea of having a pet that will live for a long time because I don't want to lose him," he explains.

"I think he feels safe with me because I feed him, and I'm always there beside him. He's known me for almost the whole of his life and I see him as a friend."

### Profile

Name: Jack  
 Age: 12  
 Pet: Crunch the bearded dragon. Jack looks after him by making sure his vivarium is the correct temperature and feeding him the right diet. Crunch likes to sit on Jack's shoulder when he's watching TV.



SCAN HERE TO  
WATCH OUR VIDEO  
OF JACK



# Life lessons

Owning a pet has a positive impact on child development according to a new survey† commissioned by Pets at Home. Its findings show that a pet could help with anxiety in children and help them to learn about bereavement and responsibility

**71%**

of parents said that their children had experienced the death of a pet.

**32%**

of parents agreed that their child's experience of a pet passing away had helped them come to terms with the death of a family member or friend.



**72%**

of parents agreed that owning a pet has helped with their child's anxiety.

**58%**

believe that their child has become more responsible since having a pet.

**26%**

believe that their child's behaviour has improved since getting a pet.

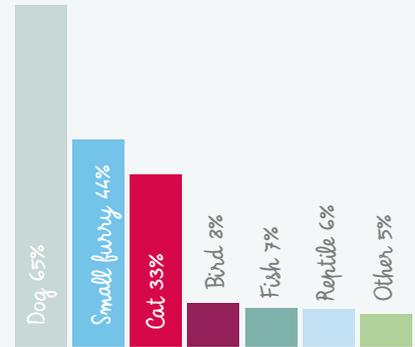
**66%**

of pet owners who have children with behavioural issues believe that their child has shown an improvement since owning a pet.

**39%\***

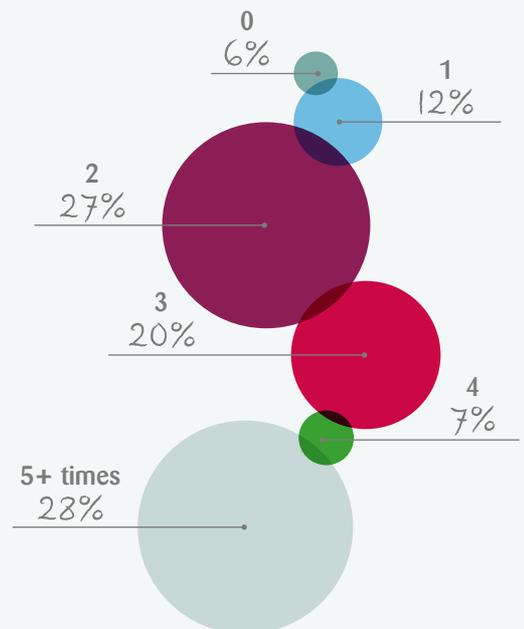
of parents thought their children felt unhappy or noticeably upset when spending time away from their pet.

Pets that parents think generally bring the most enjoyment to their child\*

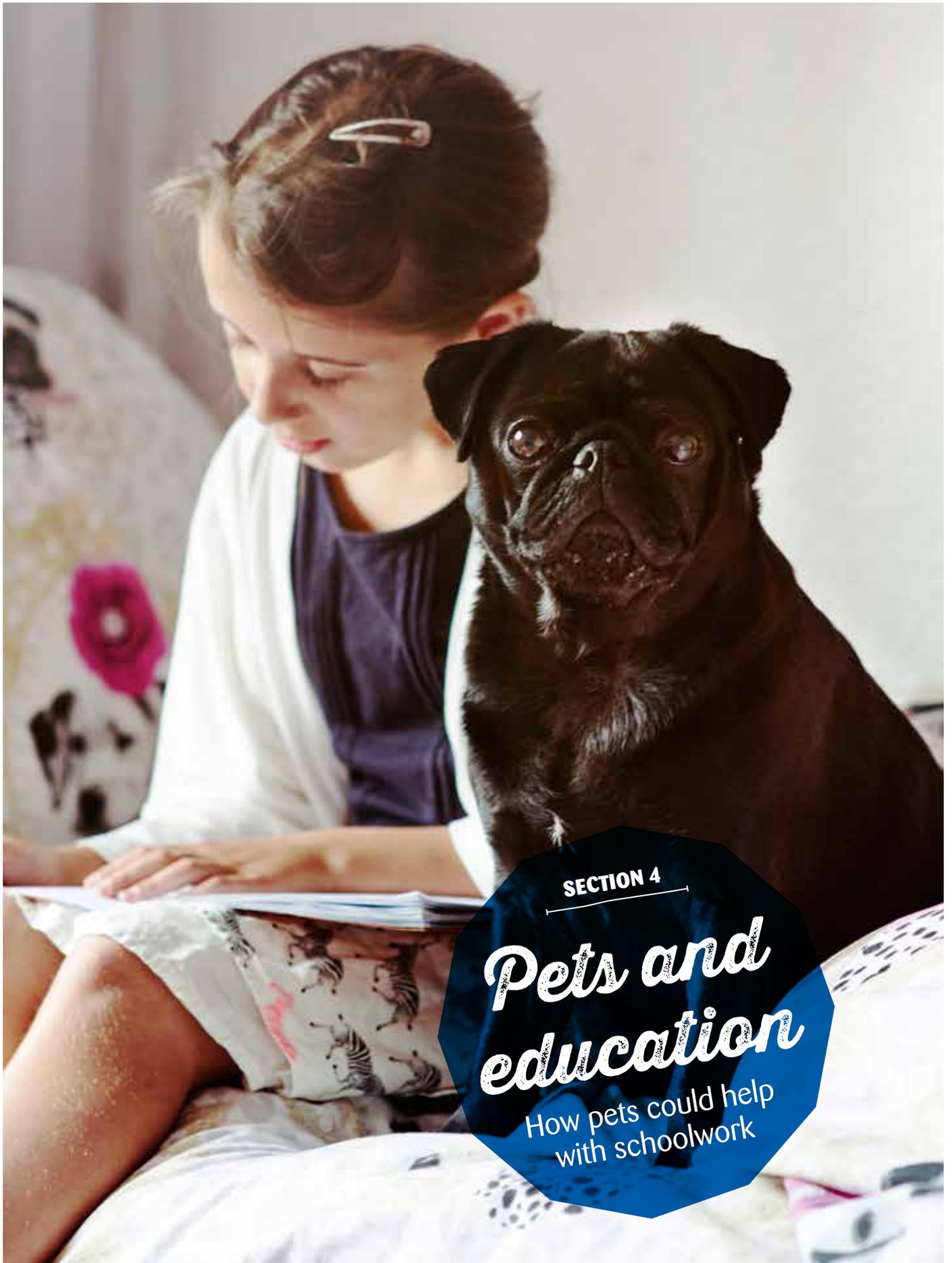


In the Pet Report survey, 90% of reptile owners, 82% of dog owners and 80% of cat owners agreed that their pet has a positive impact on child development.

The average number of times a day parents see their child laughing or smiling while in the company of their pets.\*



\*EXCEPT WHERE INDICATED. SOURCE: SURVEY CONDUCTED BY MUSTARD RESEARCH ON BEHALF OF PETS AT HOME, JUNE 2015 (SAMPLE: 4321).  
†SOURCE: CHILDREN AND PETS SURVEY CONDUCTED BY ONE POLL ON BEHALF OF HAWKS, JUNE 2015 (SAMPLE: 2000)



SECTION 4

# *Pets and education*

How pets could help  
with schoolwork



# Pet contact helps students to focus

Pets could help children to pay attention in class, and many parents now believe that pet care should be on the national curriculum, according to new research

For generations of children, taking the class hamster home during the summer holidays has been a rite of passage – a chance to prove to parents and teachers alike that you could be trusted to care for a living thing. In the UK, classroom pets have been many people's introduction to the rewarding world of looking after animals, especially for children who don't have pets in the home.

Contact with pets does children a lot of good, too. From instilling a sense of responsibility and empathy to ironing out behavioural problems<sup>1</sup> and alleviating stress<sup>2</sup>, there is a growing body of evidence that points to the beneficial effect that snuggling up with a dog or guinea pig can have on young people. And far from being a distraction, dogs have even been shown to help children pay more attention to the teacher when present in the classroom<sup>3</sup>.

Despite all this, the majority of UK schools don't keep animals. In a recent survey<sup>4</sup> by Pets at Home, only 22 per cent of parents reported that their children's school had pets. Although popular nationwide, dogs are relatively unusual in schools, with around 1 in 35 parents reporting that their child's school has a dog. A demanding walking regime and expensive food requirements explain why dogs lose out to small furies in classroom popularity. Rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters and gerbils account for nearly 60 per cent of all school pets.

With their low food and space requirements, fish are also common in the classroom – 28 per cent of

schools with pets have an aquarium. For schools lucky enough to have the space and money, even horses can be an option. Just under 1 per cent of all parents surveyed said their child's school had its own stables.

Encouragingly, there appears to be a widespread view among parents that pet care is a skill that schools should be teaching. The same research found that 73 per cent of parents want to see pet care included in the national curriculum. (At present there's no statutory requirement for teaching pet care in England and Wales. The Kennel Club estimates that only 16 per cent of children receive lessons in pet care at school<sup>5</sup>.)

Parents are broadly supportive of pets in schools, too – a majority of 55 per cent would like their child's school to have pets, rising to 68 per cent among parents aged 25-34. Reticence on the part of other parents may be down to a fear that they could end up bearing the responsibility – when children brought home pets to look after in the school holidays, nearly one in five parents ended up taking care of the pet themselves<sup>4</sup>.

Expert opinion on the question of pets in schools is divided – some seeing clear educational benefits and others voicing concerns over animal welfare. The Pet Charity, whose mission statement is “to spread awareness about the benefits of pet ownership and to increase pet welfare through education and research”, is convinced of the benefits of having appropriate animals in the classroom. It is evaluating a Pets in Schools campaign, which aims to support primary school teachers in







## Shelley Robinson explains how Pets at Home is encouraging responsible pet care

At Pets at Home, we see every day how much kids love being around animals. But the needs of pets come first for us, so it's just as important that animals love being around kids. This means that teaching people how to be responsible pet owners is a big part of what we do.

As part of our drive to get responsible pet ownership into schools, last year we teamed up with the RSPCA to create the My Pet Pals Academy. This website gives primary teachers everything they need to educate their class in looking after animals. Based around the five Welfare Needs of Animals, the programme features five downloadable lesson plans that teachers can hand out to pupils.

To make learning fun, kids can also go head-to-head in an online classroom quiz designed to test how much they know about animal welfare. The quiz can be used by teachers to assess how much their class has learned from the programme. And because we know not all children have pets, My Pet Pals Academy covers wildlife in the garden and wildbirds, too.

For outside of term time, Pets at Home runs regular school holiday pet workshops in our stores. Under the guidance of our fully-trained store colleagues, kids can meet their favourite pets, and learn about how to look after them. Workshops cover small furry animals, cats and dogs, reptiles and fish, and kids get a fun activity booklet and stickers to take away with them.

We're also happy to organise tours of our stores for groups. Whether it's for a school outing, the Children's University, Brownies, Scouts, or any other youth group, we'd love to help young people learn about their favourite pets while earning their badges.

We know that school trips can be time-consuming to organise so, in some cases, we can also arrange for our store colleagues to visit schools instead. Get in touch with your local store manager to find out more.

The welfare of pets is our top priority. That's why we think educating children about responsible pet ownership is so important. Together, we can make sure the next generation of pet owners has the knowledge to care for animals properly.

obtaining a classroom pet and giving it proper care.

Paul Miley, chairman of The Pet Charity said: "There is now a strong body of researched evidence demonstrating that the social, cognitive and emotional development of our children is improved through interactions with pets." The Pet Charity is developing a scheme to sensitively introduce pets into schools while addressing the concerns about the pets' welfare, and has already received interest from teachers keen to bring appropriate pets into the classroom.

However, the RSPCA maintains that schools can be noisy and frightening places for animals, and that it's difficult to look after any animal's needs properly in a classroom – including 'low maintenance' animals such as fish or giant snails<sup>6</sup>. Dave Allen of the RSPCA points out that the close monitoring required by pets is difficult to achieve in a classroom environment: "Key issues are the length of the school day and the holidays. Even with a rota for care, someone needs to know any animal well enough so they can notice changes in behaviour or eating habits, as these are key indicators of changes in health."

Schools also need to be aware of the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which places a legal obligation on anyone responsible for an animal to ensure that its needs are met, and this obligation doesn't end when the school day is over; it extends to weekends and holidays.

A careful balance has to be struck between the need to educate people about animal care, and the welfare needs of pets. Any school planning to introduce pets should think carefully not only about the potential benefits to the children, but also about whether they'll be able to provide the best possible life for the animal. And who can argue with that?

Sources: **1.** 'Effects of Animal-Assisted Activities with Guinea Pigs in the Primary School Classroom', ME O'Haire et al, *Anthrozoös*. 26 (3) **2.** 'Pet Ownership, but Not ACE Inhibitor Therapy, Blunts Home Blood Pressure Responses to Mental Stress', Karen Allen et al, *Hypertension* 2001 **3.** 'Evolution of research into the mutual benefits of human-animal interaction', Sandra McCune et al, *Animal Frontiers*, 4 (3) 2014 **4.** Survey conducted by Mustard Research on behalf of Pets at Home, June 2015 (sample: 4321) **5.** 'Animal welfare education in the national curriculum', The Kennel Club, 2013 **6.** 'Animals in schools' RSPCA, 2015.

Students at Bristol University sitting exams this summer took a break from revision to take part in an experiment into the calming power of cuteness – while hopefully lowering their stress levels at the same time<sup>1</sup>. The university's on-campus 'puppy room' let students chill out with a group of pups who were doing some studying of their own: training to become guide dogs.

Working together with Guide Dogs, the charity that trains and provides dogs to visually impaired people in the UK, Bristol University's puppy project offered students the chance to meet around 20 golden retrievers and Labradors, aged between 6 and 18 months. Local dog trainers and owners gave their time for free, and students were asked to make a £2 donation to the charity.

The project was hugely popular, with more than 600 signing up to take part, helping to raise more than £1,300 for Guide Dogs. To make



## Puppy power

How students at Bristol University have been fighting exam stress with some puppy love

sure the dogs stayed relaxed, the number of people in the puppy room was limited, and sessions were restricted to 15 minutes.

Gordon Trevett, from the University's Centre for Sport, Exercise and

said: "Every year I see students fretting about their exams and I thought this would be a great way to ease the stress and take their minds off it.

People with dogs have lower blood pressure in stressful situations than

those without a dog, and we know that playing with a dog can elevate levels of serotonin

and dopamine, which calm and relax."

Bristol's cuddling cure comes in the wake of research from Japan

which suggests that looking at images of cute puppies and kittens can sharpen concentration and improve focus<sup>2</sup>. Test subjects were shown pictures, and then asked to play a game similar to the children's game 'Operation', where they had to perform delicate movements using tweezers. Those who had been looking at pictures of baby animals performed better in the test than those who had been shown neutral images. The researchers speculate that looking at animals with baby-like proportions brings out people's innate parenting instincts, and causes them to perform tasks with more care.

**"Playing with a dog can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine"**

Health, hoped that setting up the puppy room would provide students with a beneficial break from revising. He

Sources: **1.** [bristol.ac.uk/news/2015/may/puppy-power.html](http://bristol.ac.uk/news/2015/may/puppy-power.html) University of Bristol, (May 2015) **2.** 'The Power of Kawaii: Viewing Cute Images Promotes a Careful Behavior and Narrows Attentional Focus', Nittono H, Fukushima M, Yano A, Moriyama H, *Plos One*, September 2012.



PHOTOGRAPHY: MATTHEW STANSFIELD

# Pet friends that help with homework

Emma Carey, 11, finds that her dogs Oreo and Buster and her cat Jess all put her in the right frame of mind for school work – and her parents have noticed the difference, too



If you've noticed an improvement in your child's school grades, there's a chance it could be

thanks to the family pet. It's not unusual for many children to be a little reluctant when it comes to doing their homework, so imagine Carly Wilkinson and Stuart Carey's delight, when their 11-year-old daughter, Emma, began to happily get stuck in to hers with her pet dog at her side.

Emma has always been good at getting her school work done," says her dad, Stuart, "but when it came to homework, it did take her a while to get settled and concentrate on getting it done."

So how do the family's pets help Emma get ready to do her homework? "Well, as soon as she gets in from school, she'll be out in the garden

playing with the dogs, or will spend time sitting with our cat Jess, giving him cuddles, which really seems to relax her and put her in a calmer state of mind."

Do the pets help Emma in other

**“Having the dogs and cat has increased Emma’s sense of responsibility and helped her self-confidence”**

# “Oreo the pug makes me laugh and helps me relax. When I feel relaxed I find my homework much easier”

ways? Stuart seems to think so. “Our pets bring so much pleasure to us as a family. I think having the dogs and cat in her life has increased Emma’s sense of responsibility and developed her self-confidence. And, in the case of the dogs, it encourages her to get outside more, which can only be a good thing.”

In fact, other studies\* have shown that going for a walk actually increases our brain power. So, does walking the dogs before settling down to do her homework give Emma an extra boost? Stuart thinks it does: “She used to have a problem with concentration and focusing on her homework, but now, after walking the dogs straight after school and playing with Jess the cat, she seems to be a lot more focused and happy to get on with her homework in her bedroom. Oreo the pug is always at her side, either laying at her feet or sitting next to her on the bed while she studies.”

So what does Emma think? “I love my dogs to bits. I take them for walks in the woods after school, or Oreo watches me on my trampoline in the garden, where he chases me around in a big circle. Buster the Labrador is a bit too big to sit on the bed. He is quite old now and finds it difficult to get upstairs.”

But Emma still has her other



canine pal to keep her company. “Oreo the pug sits with me every night when I do my homework. Sometimes he even flops his paws on my school book and licks me, which makes me laugh and helps me relax. When I feel relaxed I find my homework much easier, which is brilliant.”

Stuart’s observations and Emma’s comments are backed up by the Pet Report’s\*\* findings, which revealed that one in 10 pet owners with kids have noticed a

boost in their child’s school work, which they believe is down to an animal companion. This highlights the social and behavioural benefits our companions could have on our early development.



## Profile

Name: Emma Carey  
 Age: 11  
 Pets: Oreo the pug, who is always at Emma’s side, Buster the Labrador, who is getting old but still loves playing in the garden and Jess the cat, who makes Emma feel calm and relaxed.



SCAN HERE TO WATCH OUR VIDEO OF EMMA



\*SOURCES: BBC.CO.UK/PROGRAMMES/P02ZZ7QL: AGEING, FITNESS AND NEUROCOGNITIVE FUNCTION; AUTHOR KRAMER ET AL. NATURE. 400 (6743): 1999 (CITED IN HTTP://NEWS.BBC.CO.UK/1/1/1/SCI/TECH/4066334.STM)  
 \*\*SOURCE: SURVEY CONDUCTED BY MUSTARD RESEARCH ON BEHALF OF PETS AT HOME, JUNE 2015 (SAMPLE: 4321)

# Pupils' pals

Having a school pet in the classroom can be an effective way of helping kids to learn about taking responsibility and caring for animals – and many parents believe that it improves their children's results and behaviour, too<sup>†</sup>

**73%**

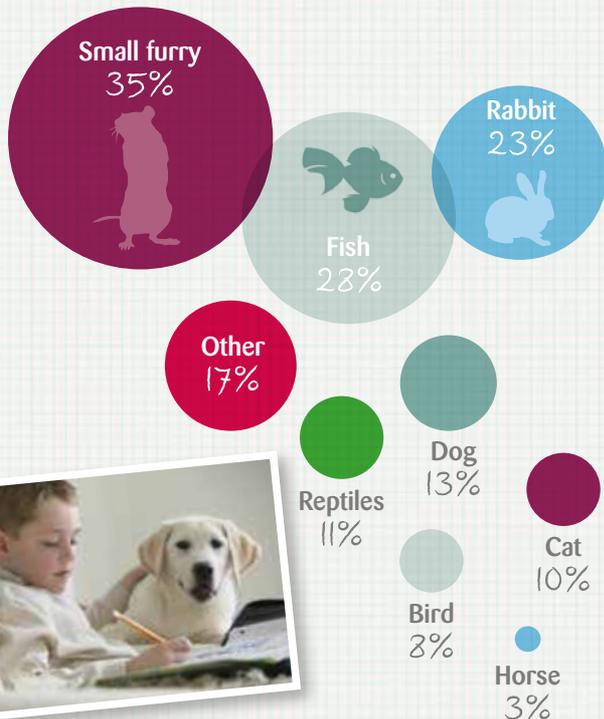
of parents agree that pet care should be taught as part of the national curriculum.

**55%**

of parents would like their child's school to have a school pet.

HOWEVER, ONLY ONE IN FIVE SCHOOLS HAVE PETS, INCLUDING RABBITS, GUINEA PIGS AND GOLDFISH

What pets do our schools have?



**11%**

of parents surveyed think that their child's school grades have improved as a result of having a pet.

**26%**

of parents surveyed think that their child's behaviour has improved as a result of having a pet.



**25%**

of children revise for exams in the company of a pet.



FACT

Handling puppies has been shown to elevate levels of dopamine in humans – which is why in 2015 the University of Bristol set up a 'puppy room' to relieve exam stress, helping its students to relax and take their minds off their workload.\*

<sup>†</sup>EXCEPT WHERE INDICATED, SOURCE: SURVEY CONDUCTED BY MUSTARD RESEARCH ON BEHALF OF PETS AT HOME, JUNE 2015 (SAMPLE: 4321); \*SOURCE: THE UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL

SECTION 5

# *Finding a pet*

How to prepare  
for owning a pet





“Educating about responsible pet care is a big part of our work and we strongly believe that engaging with children is important for the future of pets in our society”



# How to prepare for owning a pet

From modest beginnings in 1924, Wood Green, The Animals Charity has grown to become one of the leading animal welfare organisations in the UK, taking in animals of all shapes and sizes. As well as cats and dogs, it finds loving new homes for chickens, rabbits, mice, guinea pigs, goats, sheep, ferrets and more. Wendy Kruger, dog training and welfare consultant at Wood Green, The Animals Charity offers her advice on sourcing pets responsibly

## What is the most suitable pet for a child under 10?

Probably the best pets that engage well with children are domesticated pet rats or guinea pigs. Rats are calm, good to handle and live in the house so are inside with you when the weather is bad, while guinea pigs are hugely entertaining and, once socialised, enjoy interacting with their owners.

## Where would you recommend getting a first pet from?

I would always recommend a rescue centre that gives information about that pet – what it needs in terms of housing, attention and company, how to handle him or

her, how long the pet might live, what owning this pet might cost and health issues to look out for. I would also strongly favour an organisation that provides ongoing support and advice about how to care for your pet.

## What are the main things that people should consider before sourcing a pet?

You should think about where the pet will live, and if they have enough room to live a contented life. Many species need social company of their own type, so consider this when choosing your pet. Remember that a contented animal will be a joy to care for and



make a much better pet than a lonely or frustrated animal. How long has the child wanted a pet? Have they researched how to care for it and, having discovered the less desirable elements such as cleaning accommodation, are they still as enthusiastic? Do the adults want the pet? In many cases it will be the adult that does a lot of the caring. How much time does that pet type need and how much time do you or your family have spare to give the pet. Can you afford the care and vet visits, and have you looked into pet insurance?

#### **How should you prepare a child for looking after a pet?**

See if you can look after friends' pets to give children an idea of what pet ownership entails. Perhaps ask them to commit to a simple small daily job they wouldn't normally do to prove their commitment to pet ownership. Wood Green also run animal

carer sessions for young people interested in pet ownership.

#### **Do you give advice to potential pet owners on which pet to choose for their lifestyle?**

Wood Green gives owners lots of advice and support during the rehoming process. Our aim is for our customers to rehome a pet that suits their lifestyle.

#### **Do you offer after-care advice to rehoming after they have taken their pet home?**

When a customer rehomes from us, we commit to offering free care and behaviour advice for that pet's lifetime. We also now have a low-cost service for dogs and cats that are not from Wood Green. If we can enable owners to solve problems before they get to the point of rehoming, it's great for the pet and the owner. Most of the problems that customers ring us about are solvable.

#### **Are your rehomed animals inspected regularly to ensure that the pets are receiving a high standard of care?**

Ensuring that the rehoming process is both thorough and customer-friendly means we have very few post-homing issues. The charity does follow-up checks after rehoming to see how pets are doing.

#### **How do you get your message about rehoming/sourcing pets out there to young people?**

##### **Do you visit schools?**

We have an education team that does school visits and holds events on our sites and in the community. We also attend shows and events that are popular with families. Educating about responsible pet care is a big part of our work and we strongly believe that engaging with children is important for the future of pets in our society.

# Pebble's now purring after a rocky start

When 12-year-old Maïna and her mum, Marie-Alice, first took tomcat Pebble home, he was very unsettled. But with a lot of love and attention, he was soon transformed into the cool, calm and collected cat that they both adore



I love Pebble,” says 12-year-old Maïna from south London, stroking her purring black tomcat. “He

makes me feel loved because he's always kissing us and licking our noses and I find it really funny.”

She says that Pebble usually greets her when she returns from school to the flat she shares with her Portuguese-French mother Marie-Alice Dias, and they have a cuddle right away. “And sometimes when I'm in the middle of homework and he has nothing to do, he comes and sits on my lap.”

The pair are clearly close, so it's hard to believe that when Pebble arrived aged three months in September 2011, he was so unsettled that despite having previous experience of owning rescue cats, Marie-Alice almost returned him. But Maïna had seen a different side of him. “When we saw Pebble, I said, ‘I want this cat,’ because he was so fluffy and he





looked shy – he seemed very calm,” says Māina.

Marie-Alice was less sure. “The lady at the vet said, ‘I don’t think he wants to be handled,’” she says. “And I thought, alarm bells!” The RSPCA sent a visitor to make sure their flat was liveable for Pebble and had outdoor access. “She was happy that we were on the ground floor because he could jump from the window and come back in,” says Marie-Alice. Although they’d made all the preparations – bed, food and litter tray – when Pebble came home

**“We tried to find the right place for Pebble to eat so he’d be less anxious”**

after his first injections, he was clearly unhappy. “We tried to find the right place for Pebble to eat so he’d be less anxious and settle more,” says Marie-Alice. “I think he missed his mum. He was hiding in different places and he didn’t eat for five days. He was also vomiting and had diarrhoea,” she says. “I called the RSPCA and said, ‘I don’t know if I can have him here. Maybe he needs a companion, and I can’t have two cats.’”

However, Pebble must have realised he was in the last-chance saloon. At the end of his first week, Marie-Alice made the difficult decision to prepare her daughter for the return of her first-ever pet to the RSPCA. “I said to Māina, ‘If after this weekend he’s not settling, we may have to let him go.’” Marie-Alice and Māina went to visit friends for the day and when they returned, they were amazed to find Pebble transformed. He was happy to be handled and was even purring. “I couldn’t believe it,” says Marie-Alice. “From that day on he has just followed us everywhere. I think he knew that it was his last chance!”

The three have since settled into a happy life together. Of course, being a cat, Pebble has individual quirks. Māina says his favourite thing is to play outside and to bring home ‘gifts’ such as birds, mice and, once, a squirrel, and though he mostly eats tinned cat food, he also loves melon. “I think he’s really clever because he can understand us when we’re talking English or French,” Māina adds. And on cue, Māina says “bisou” (French for ‘kiss’) and Pebble rubs his

nose on hers. “I don’t know how many times I’ve tripped because the cat is always around me,” says Marie-Alice. “He never wakes me up [in the morning] for a feed but when I open my eyes he gives me and Māina kisses.”

And even when they travel, Pebble goes, too. He has been to France a couple of times. “We have to remember to take three passports when we take him,” laughs Marie-Alice.



## Profile

Name: Māina Dias-Niang

Age: 12

Pet: Pebble the tomcat was very anxious at first but now he has settled in he is very affectionate and loves to play with Māina. In fact, Pebble is so comfortable he even goes on holiday with Māina and her mum.



SCAN HERE TO WATCH OUR VIDEO OF MĀINA AND MARIE-ALICE



# Buying a pet: the essentials

Here's our must-read guide to getting an animal companion

## Do

Take your time to decide on which pet you would like to purchase – it is an important decision and needs to be considered carefully.

Make sure you source your pet from a responsible breeder or licensed pet shop – animal charities and organisations, such as the RSPCA, recommend sourcing from a rehoming centre, reputable breeder or retailer.

Avoid buying through newspaper and online ads.

Understand the commitment to owning a pet. Space, time and costs are important factors to consider.

## Don't

Purchase a pet on an impulse or for someone else as a present.

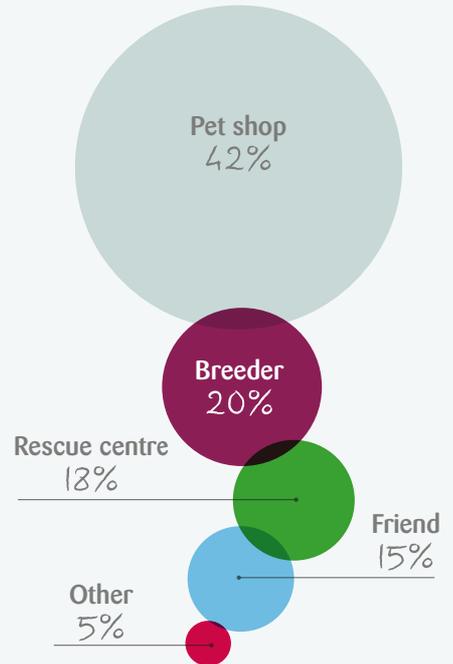
Acquire a pet if your living situation is likely to change dramatically within a short period of time. This will prevent you from devoting time, energy and care for your pet needs.

Place an importance on achieving the cheapest price or a 'deal' for your pet. Expect to pay a fair price.

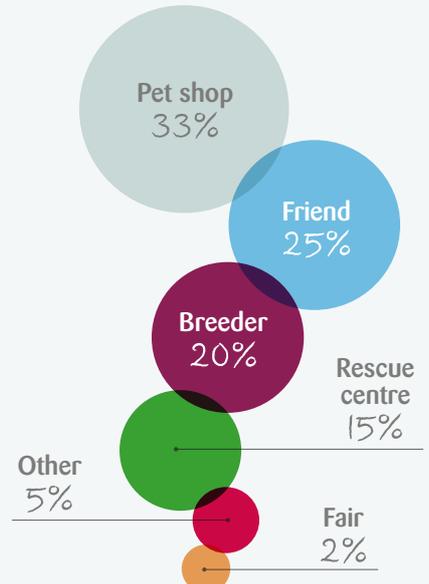
Pets at Home vet, Dr Maeve Moorcroft, comments: "We're extremely happy to see an improvement in the way parents are sourcing pets for their children. We believe that getting a new pet is an important and life-changing decision, which should be thought about carefully!"

Today's families are sourcing their children's first pets more responsibly\*. Buying animals from a pet shop has increased, although this trend is less pronounced for dogs and is largely driven by small animal purchases.

### Where we source our pets today...



### ... and where our parents got their childhood pets



\*SOURCE: SURVEY CONDUCTED BY MUSTARD RESEARCH ON BEHALF OF PETS AT HOME, JUNE 2015 (SAMPLE: 4321)

# Let's keep talking

Thank you for taking the time to enjoy our Pet Report.  
We hope you've found it interesting and that it's  
answered any questions you may have had.

We'd love to hear your thoughts on this edition, on how pets  
have enriched your life and we'd also like to hear about your  
childhood pets. Please come and join our conversations on  
Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Use the hashtag #petreport  
to give us your thoughts and feedback.



We hope you, your children and your  
pets will enjoy making some wonderful  
memories together in the coming year!

To read the report online and  
for further case studies, visit  
[petsathome.com/petreport](https://petsathome.com/petreport)

#### Contact details

Pets at Home Press Office,  
Havas PR  
0161 236 2277  
[prpets@havasww.com](mailto:prpets@havasww.com)

Produced by  
John Brown Media

