

The importance of companion animals to society

Richard Avanzino

ABSTRACT

The importance of the human-animal bond is self-evident. Statistical evidence confirms that companion animals are extremely beneficial to human existence. Not only do they benefit us psychologically, but also socially and even physically. This paper reviews the different aspects of that impact.

INTRODUCTION

Ask any pet owner whether his or her animal companion is important and they'll probably start laughing. "Of course my pet is important to me" they'll say - although they probably wouldn't call it a pet. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 55% of Americans think of their companion animals as their children, not as pets.

Ever since *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus returned home after 20 years unrecognised and unwelcomed by everyone except his faithful dog Argos, the human-animal bond has been celebrated in verse, legend, and song. But now there are statistical data to confirm what every pet owner knows intuitively: Companion animals are good for you - in every way.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS

The emotional upside of a companion animal is obvious to anyone who's ever come home after a rough day at the office to be greeted by a friendly wag of a tail by a cheerful dog or a proprietary rub of the leg by a purring cat. As Harry Truman said after enduring a storm of criticism from Capital Hill, "If you want a friend in this town, get a dog."

Animals share our joys when we're up and bring comfort to us when we're down. Providing for their simple needs gives form and structure to our increasingly chaotic and fragmented lives. When you're frazzled by being pulled in too many directions at once, the daily walk with the dog is often the only chance to relax and just enjoy being in the moment. Indeed, in our sedentary society, it's often the only daily exercise we get.

For single people, animal companions are a welcome relief from loneliness. For childless couples, pets can be love objects on which to lavish their parenting urges. For children growing up with an animal in the home is like having your own personal Cookie Monster - a large, fuzzy creature who gives you total, unconditional love. In addition caring for a pet teaches children responsibility and consideration for the needs of another creature.

The benefits are even more obvious when you look at the effect animals have on the most emotionally vulnerable humans. For more than 10 years The San Francisco SPCA's Animal Assisted Therapy Program has brought dogs, cats, and other small animals to hospitals, nursing homes, and retirement centres. All the while, researchers have been monitoring the impact with statistical analysis.

An early nursing home study (since confirmed by many others) found significant reductions in depression among the residents as a result of AAT visits, along with increases in life satisfaction, psychological well-being and psychosocial functioning. These results were duplicated in a three-year study of psychiatric patients at the Locked Inpatient Psychiatric Unit at San Francisco General Hospital.

This is a ward for acute psychiatric patients, with diagnoses of schizophrenia, manic depression, major or psychotic depressions, and organic brain syndrome. In addition, many also had secondary diagnoses of alcoholism or drug abuse.

From June 19, 1984 to June 30, 1987, The San Francisco SPCA conducted 65 AAT visits and the effect on the patients were striking:

- 45.53% demonstrated an increase in socialisation;
- 43.68% demonstrated an increase in communication;
- 35.11% demonstrated an increase in reality orientation;
- 59.98% demonstrated an increase in attention span;
- 47.38% demonstrated an increase in concentration;
- 70.06% demonstrated an increase in engagement;
- 61.99% demonstrated an increase in affect and mood;
- 51.74% demonstrated a decrease in the level of anxiety.

But perhaps the most significant changes were detected by simply observing the patient/animal interactions. Typically, many patients first greeted the animals protected by a blank affect (i.e. wearing an expression of non-involvement or boredom) or with an obvious display of fright.

Encouraged by other patients - itself a significant change from the normal patient-to-patient interaction - as well as by SF/SPCA staff, most patients eventually touched the animals, albeit tentatively. This was frequently followed by an offer of food and stroking, followed by holding the pet. The final stage was a warm and nurturing embrace. Many patients were surprised - and delighted - to find that the animals showed signs of genuine pleasure.

Thus the patients got the chance to experience themselves in a positive role: that of friend and provider. This was a far cry from their usual experiences which almost invariably ended in failure, triggering in turn the memory of past failures. The AAT visits provided the rare opportunity for everyone to succeed and feel important, thus helping to create a more humane hospital environment.

Finally no consideration of the psychological benefits of companion animals can be complete without considering the spiritual aspect. In an ever more alienated world animals can be our teachers, reminding us of the simple pleasures of life and the joy of loving and being loved.

SOCIAL BENEFITS

Numerous studies have confirmed what we already know: if you want to meet new people, a dog or a cat is a great ice-breaker as well as a conversation piece.

This is specially true for people with mobility problems or other special needs that keep them socially isolated. A study of people in wheelchairs found that the mere presence of their service dog greatly increased the number of friendly social approaches by strangers. In addition, service dogs often make it physically possible for disabled people to go places they otherwise wouldn't be able to go.

The long history of Guide Dogs for the Blind is ample proof of this thesis but in more recent years other types of service dogs have also confirmed it. At the San Francisco SPCA our Hearing Dog Program has placed more than 500 specially trained dogs with deaf or hard-of-hearing people. These dogs alert them to warning signals like smoke detectors or burglar alarms, as well as ordinary sounds like a telephone ringing or a doorbell chiming. The dogs are not only their owners' gateway to the outside world, they can literally be lifesavers. One is a tiny Pomeranian mix named Mr Bounce, who made the headlines in the San Francisco newspapers recently when he woke his deaf owner out of a sound sleep to alert her to the carbon monoxide detector going off.

Another factor that keeps all of us isolated these days is the pervasive fear of crime and here again a companion animal can make all the difference. No mugger in his right mind would attack someone with a dog. The sound of a bark can be a powerful deterrent to burglars and, since it's difficult to guess the size of a dog by its voice, small or medium-sized dogs can often be as effective in discouraging burglaries as big ones.

At the time of this writing the State Bar of California is considering a resolution to urge the state legislature to overturn the current ban on pets (other than seeing-eye dogs) in such public places as restaurants, theatres and supermarkets, on the express ground that their very presence discourages crime. A dog is a much more visible deterrent than tear gas or a gun. In addition a dog feels loyalty (unlike an inanimate object) so there's far less chance that it could be snatched away by the criminal and used against its owner.

It stands to reason that the safer people feel, the more comfortable they are going out, especially at night. The more they go out, the more opportunity they have to interact with each other socially.

Finally there are the traditional roles that companion animals play to make human life better, from the cats who protect our food from vermin to the search and rescue dogs who locate victims after natural disasters.

PHYSICAL BENEFITS

Many studies, starting with the landmark research that found the sheer act of petting an animal can lower a patient's blood pressure, have confirmed the physiological benefits of companion animals.

In a study of 8,000 people who attended a preventative heart clinic, women over 40 and men of all ages who owned pets had lower blood pressure and 20% lower triglyceride levels than carefully matched non-pet owners. In addition, male pet owners between the ages of 30 and 60 had lower cholesterol levels than non-owners. These findings are especially dramatic because the researchers' intent was to challenge the belief that pet ownership promotes good health.

Another study found a strong correlation between companion animal ownership and increased survival among patients with heart disease and to increased survival in patients admitted to a coronary intensive care unit. Significantly, these results were independent of marital status or living situation - two factors that have a great impact on survival. In a carefully controlled one-year follow-up study of patients discharged from a coronary care unit, 28% of non-pet owners died within the first year, while only 6% of the pet owners died.

Another study found that talking to people raises blood pressure, while talking to animals lowers it. Yet another found that owning a dog is a better stress-reducer than being visited by a good friend.

Older people with weak attachment to other people but strong attachment to pets reported less recent illness than non-owners. In a study of older people who have recently lost a spouse, pet owners experienced no deterioration in health during bereavement, while non-pet owners did.

These beneficial results matched our own experience in an experimental three-year study of patients in deep comas. From October, 1993, through January, 1995, our Animals Assisted Therapy teams visited a total of 10 patients in four different ICUs. Three patients were at San Francisco General's Trauma Unit, with the remaining seven in the Neurological (4), Paediatric (2) and Adult (1) ICUs at the University of San Francisco's Moffit Hospital. The patients included six males and four females, ranging in age from 13 to 64 years.

From April through July, 1995, our AAT teams visited a total of nine patients at St Luke's Hospital Sub-Acute Care Unit in San Francisco. The patients included six males and three females, between the ages of 29 and 60 years.

Final results await the analysis of the quantitative data (Glasgow Coma Scale scores) but anecdotal evidence suggests that the AAT visits made a profound impact on the coma patients. As an example one patient, an adult male, appeared to respond well to the animal's presence even while unconscious, showing bodily movement and a significant drop in cranial pressure when the animal was brought to him. Another, a 14 year old boy who was in a comatose state following surgery to remove a malignant brain tumour, showed even more marked effect. A volunteer AAT handler and her dog named Izzy began making visits to the unconscious boy. He awoke from his unconscious state between Izzy's second and third visits. The only word he was able to form during this lucid state was "Izzy".

Studies have shown that the faster patients come out of their comas, the better their chances for a full recovery. But the ripple effect goes way beyond the individual patient. Improved patient health and morale means shorter hospital stays leading to reduced expenses at a time when mushrooming medical costs are becoming a financial and political crisis for society.

These benefits are most observable at the extremes of human existence, like psychotics and coma patients. But they illustrate in sharp relief the more subtle benefits that we all derive from animal companions.

Every person whose blood pressure is lowered by petting an animal represents a heart attack that didn't happen. Every child who learns kindness and gentleness and responsibility for others from caring for a pet is a good citizen in the making. It's no coincidence that many of our most heinous criminals, like Charles Manson, Richard Speck, and Ted Bundy, started out in childhood torturing small animals.

It's hard to quantify these things, or to measure how far their impact extends. But the benefits of companion animals to society are no less real for being unmeasured.

CONCLUSION

More than one observer has remarked that our animal companions are our intellectual inferiors but our moral superiors. They ask for so little and give so much. "If you could cross man with the cat," said Mark Twain, "it would improve man but deteriorate the cat." The same could be said for other species.

We are fortunate that they spend their short lives with us. Thanks to them, our lives are not only happier, but also longer.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Avanzino

President, The San Francisco SPCA

2500 16th Street

San Francisco, CA 94703

Telephone: (415) 554-3000

Fax: (415) 552-7041

E-mail: publicinfo@sfpca.org

Richard Avanzino has been President of The San Francisco SPCA for 20 years. In that time, he has transformed it into one of the premier no-kill shelters in the United States. Among the many groundbreaking programs he has instituted are the Hearing Dog Program, the Doggy Daycare Centre, the Pet Grooming College and the Sido Service, which places SF/SPCA members' pets in loving new homes after their original owners die.

But the crowning achievement of Mr Avanzino's administration was the Adoption Pact signed in 1994 between The SF/SPCA and the city shelter. Under the terms of the pact every adoptable cat or dog in San Francisco is guaranteed a home. Since the pact not one single adoptable dog or cat has been euthanased in a San Francisco shelter. This is a record no other city in the United States can match.

In addition to leading The SF/SPCA, with its \$8.3 million annual budget, its 130-plus staff and its more than 2,000 volunteers, Mr Avanzino also writes a weekly column that runs in seven different San Francisco Bay area newspapers. He, his wife, son, two dogs, a cat and a canary, live in Moraga, California, in which he served as Mayor in 1989.

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