

Public Abstract

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Title: Pet Dogs in Families of Children with Autism: Children's Social Skills and Attachment to Their Dogs

One in 88 children may have autism. This study compared the social skills of children with autism who lived with and who did not live with pet dogs. The families were also asked questions about owning a dog. During a telephone call, parents were asked questions about the social skills of their children with autism. Children who lived with dogs were asked eight questions about what they did with their dog, and how they felt about their dog. Seventy parents agreed to answer questions, and 47 of them owned dogs. Children who lived with dogs had better scores on the social skills questions than those who did not have dogs, but the difference was small. The longer a family owned a dog, the better their children's social skills. In families that owned any kind of pet, children with autism had more social skills in "assertion," than children with no pets. Assertion is starting a conversation with other people, or responding to other people when they start a conversation. Eighty-nine percent of parents who owned dogs, said their children were "very attached" to their dogs. Most children were more attached to small dogs. Parents said the burdens of owning dogs were problems when they traveled, and the time and cost of caring for dogs. Parents said the benefits for children, of a dog were teaching children responsibility, giving them companionship and unconditional love. This was the first time any study looked at pet dogs for children with autism.