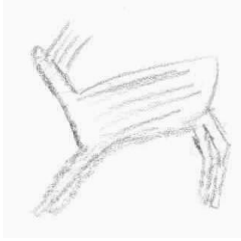


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## WHY THIS MATTERS

*Nothing's impossible in my world of make-believe.  
Birds move in the air above. Some day I'll join them.  
I can fly to the ground from huge rocks and big logs.  
And . . .once I flew from the top board fence . . .  
That's a long ways.  
Wanna see?*

*- Margaret Hevel*

Ask children about their animal friends and watch their faces light up. Animals touch an intimate part of our souls and enrich our lives. They can be a working partner or a guardian angel. Even the most jaded adolescent will soften when shown the furry faces of kittens or puppies. Animals ground us. They help us not to take ourselves too seriously. Their very nature impels us to earn their trust. Their unwavering faith in us invites us to live at our best.

This sense of well-being and of being loved should be reason enough to recommend that all families include animals in their lives. However, there are also physiological benefits to owning a pet.

These health benefits are even gaining attention from the medical community. As a key seminar speaker in 2002, Doctor Edward Creagan, a Mayo Clinic cancer specialist said, “I

*“Providing an enriched environment encourages children to become active participants rather than observers.”*

*Marion Diamond, PH.D.,  
Magic Trees of the Mind*

consider getting a pet to be one of the easiest and most rewarding ways to living a longer, healthier life.”

In Canada, the government is considering a bill that would subsidize the costs of pet ownership for the elderly. Supporters of this bill claim that the money spent on pet welfare will be offset by a reduction in medical and health care expenses. Their claims are based on some substantial studies. In 1999, Petnet Australia estimated that companion animals saved the Australian government a whopping 2.227 billion dollars of health care expenditures. The study found that when compared to non-pet owners, people who own pets visit the doctor less often, use less medication, have lower cholesterol and blood pressure, recover more quickly from illness and surgery, are less lonely, and deal better with stress.

The elderly are not the only ones plagued by stress. Stresses placed on our children have skyrocketed over the past twenty years. Children as young as nine years old are experiencing panic attacks, and twelve-year-olds are suffering from ulcers. Chronic stress can elevate blood pressure, a major cause of cardiovascular disease. Some elementary schools, aware of the growing epidemic, are offering stress-reduction classes.

Adolescence is one of the most stressful times in human growth and development. Not only is society placing pressure on youth, but also the adolescent’s body is changing at a rapid rate. Teen suicide and homicide rates have tripled. Teens have so much going on in their lives that, as parents, we often walk that fine line between encouragement and intrusion. Teaching teens methods to handle stress can help reduce their anxiety. For instance, encouraging a teen to take the dog on regular walks can be very therapeutic, both physically and emotionally. During physical activity, the body stimulates the release of hormones that combat depression. Walking

with a dog will take advantage of the pet's natural calming effect in addition to the benefits of walking.

In February of 2000, researchers at State University of New York in Buffalo studied a group of stockbrokers, one of the most stressful professions. As part of the research, the stockbrokers were paired with a pet in order to study the effects of having a pet in the family. Although all of the subjects showed some kind of health issues at the start of the research, the results showed that a pet provided a positive impact on the general health and well-being of the stockbrokers. The researchers admitted they were not sure exactly how the animals effected the positive changes. They hypothesized, however, that it had to do with reliability and consistency. They believe that pets provide a calming comfort in an otherwise chaotic world. A companion pet can offer this same comfort and consistency to our children.

Another reason a companion pet's presence can be so important for our children is its effect as an antidepressant. One study found that a few minutes of cuddling a pet relieved more stress than talking with a parent or a friend. Further, if a child is carrying out an unpleasant task such as a dreaded homework assignment, a pet's presence was more effective in making the task palatable than having a human companion.



At Purdue University Center for the Human-Animals Bond, Dr. Alan Beck found that nearly seventy percent of children confide in their pets. The children said that they knew their pets would not betray them or their secrets. In general, children gave animals high scores for listening, reassurance, appreciation, and companionship. They also believed their pets provided them with unconditional love. One 1985 Michigan study found that seventy-five percent of children age ten to fourteen turned to their feathered or furry friend when they felt upset. Pets don't discriminate and they don't judge.

A pet can serve as a safe outlet for different family members to share with one another. Pets offer parents teachable moments; they can be a conduit both for our children's and for our emotions. Communication that might be stilted and difficult can flow smoothly over the shared task of grooming a pet or cleaning a cage.

A pet's ability to open communication is especially important for teens that are more apt to bury their feelings than to express them. Adolescents are often so confused that it may be impossible for them to find the right words to convey what they are feeling. If children lose the ability to talk about their feelings, they may become depressed and therefore feel alienated and alone. Animals can help teens through this difficult time because they demand interaction. The attention needed from the teen may be as simple as tending to the animal's basic needs or as complex as giving a training session.

Animals respond to sunrises and sunsets, to the pulse of seasons, to the gravitational pull caused by the changing phases of the moon. By spending time with animals, we relax, our pulse slows, our pace tempers. We reconnect to a natural sense of time long forgotten.

Let us take you on a journey to explore the value of letting pets and nature into your home. We feel the gifts that animals and nature bring will enrich your lives. They will provide you with varied opportunities for teaching and for creating gateways to communicating with your children. Some of the activities we suggest cost as little as a pencil and piece of paper. Others can be more involved.

As you read through this book, we invite you to listen, talk, and become involved in the life of your child. There is only one key ingredient to successful parenting: time. We must touch the lives of our children daily, or one day we may realize that our children are grown and gone

and our chance to influence their lives has passed. The best parenting costs nothing...love is free.

