

Pets help people cope with life

Researchers use companion animals for therapy with the young, old, sick and handicapped

By Susan Hopkins
Battalion Staff

Few people would not smile at a puppy with a wagging tail or reach out to pet a soft, purring kitten. An exciting new dimension of animal — and human — care is based on just that: the gut feeling researchers have that companion animals are good for people.

Studies have shown that pets actually give people a will to live. They improve both the mental and physical quality of life for people of all ages in a variety of situations.

"People are suddenly smiling and caring when pets are around — it doesn't take scientific research to know that," says Dr. Bill McCulloch, advocate of pet therapy and professor of veterinary medicine at Texas A&M University.

"In the past we have taken the value of the pet-people relationship for granted but now we are finding increased evidence that pets help to improve human health and well being — certainly the quality of life."

Pets are being used more and more in the United States to curb the lonely feelings of old people, prolong the lives of heart patients, aid in the development and responsibility of children and bring about increased self respect and strengthened egos in mentally ill patients.

McCulloch and his brother, Dr. Michael McCulloch, a Portland, Ore., psychiatrist, have studied pet-people relationships extensively. In a Detroit Free Press article, Michael said people project personalities onto their pets and will construe even their boa constrictor's, hamster's or turtle's behavior as loving or caring.

"A pet is non-judgemental and not critical," Michael said. "Owning a pet seems to contribute to self-esteem. It's that feeling of affiliation and bonding that seems to be therapeutic."

R.A. Mugford and J.G. M'Comisky did a scientific pilot study on the psychosocial value of

animal companionship with elderly people (ages 75-81) who lived alone without pets.

Australian parakeets were placed in the homes of old-age pensioners in Yorkshire, England. Some oldsters were also given television sets or plants to determine if these factors would dilute their interest in the birds. Results showed that the parakeets acted as social catalysts for the old people.

One elderly woman reportedly found that children visited more often after she taught her

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bird to recite their names. And many old people formed such intimate attachments to pets that conversation about them displaced the monotonous discussions of past and pending ailments.

Clarice Seufert of the Minnesota Department of Health writes about the idea of allowing nursing homes to have pets, under certain restrictions. She says that pets often provide emotional comfort to nursing home residents who may be experiencing a loss of autonomy, or feelings of loneliness or rejection. In addition, she says, pets may help ease the transition from community life to an institutional environment by providing more homelike settings.

A Minnesota law permits nursing homes to keep animals on the premises. Texas has not yet followed with such legislation. However, Bill McCulloch said, he is working with Texas officials to review all the legal ramifications involved in allowing pets into public institutions. He has already contacted several Bryan-College Station nursing

and retirement home administrators about his efforts. He said that although pets are not a panacea, he believes the positive effects of companion animals as an adjunct to other forms of therapy and activities far outweigh the possible problems.

While small pets like dogs, cats and birds tend to help the elderly cope with bereavement, loneliness and boredom, larger

animals can also be good medicine.

The Texas A&M Horseman's Association sponsors clinics for mentally and physically handicapped students, teaching them basic horsemanship skills to improve balance and coordination and to help develop confidence and muscle strength.

Some animals actually enable — or at least encourage — people to live longer.

A study of 92 heart patients found that those who owned pets had a significantly higher chance of surviving one year than those who did not.

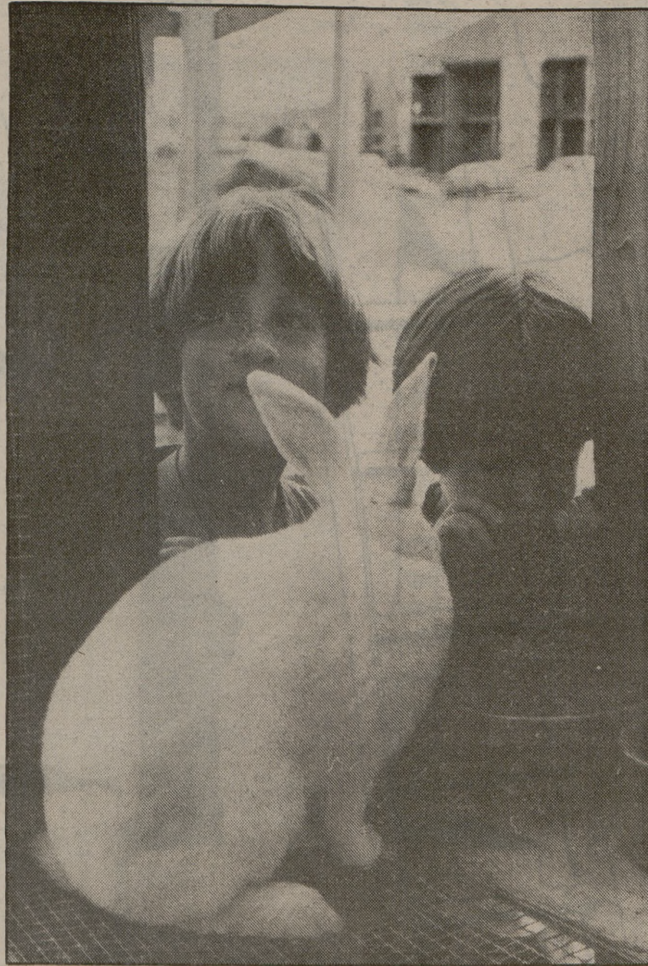
The four researchers who did the study said that "the speechless kind of companionship shared with pets may provide a source of relaxation that human companions who demand talk as the price of companionship may not provide." The study also indicated that simple kinds of contact comfort can produce positive physiological changes in humans.

For a child, petting a loved animal can provide a simple, yet much-needed, pleasure. Dr. Boris M. Levinson, in "Psychology of Pet Ownership," says that pets can help human beings solve developmental problems at various stages of maturity. He says that children need love, affection and nurturant care, and that when such care is not available or is in short supply, a pet can partially fill the void.

In addition, he says, pets can help toddlers become assertive and can help older children become more independent in handling school work and other tasks, thus helping to develop a sense of identity.

Bill McCulloch also pointed out that as a child watches his pet live and grow, from birth to death, he experiences an emotional "dress rehearsal" of the human life cycle.

A survey by Levinson revealed that 33 percent of clinical child psychologists in New York



Stephanie McKay and Miki Cysewski check to be sure the pet rabbit at French's Care-A-Lot Day Care Center has plenty of food and water after a hard session at play with several children. All children there are encouraged to pet Jelly Bean, feed him and observe his behavior, as a vital part of their learning experience.

Photo by Craig Atchison

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On the cover: Broken mirrors, black cats, ladders, spilt salt and open umbrellas — bad news for the superstitious any day, but this Friday has special significance. The second Friday the Thirteenth of 1981 is upon us. If you made it through the first round in February, better watch out! Cover art by Scott McCullar.