Can Cats Lessen Anxiety in Kids With Autism?

The companionship of feline pets may calm and comfort youngsters with autism.

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Previous research shows that pet dogs are beneficial to children with autism. Now, new findings published in the Journal of Pediatric Nursing, from scientists at the University of Missouri (MU), show that cats can help to increase empathy in these kids as well as minimize separation anxiety, reports Show Me Mizzou, a magazine produced by the University of Missouri that serves its students, faculty, alumni and people in the community.

For the study, researchers recruited families with children with autism, a developmental disorder. Scientists monitored the kids, who ranged in age from 6 to 14, after their parents adopted a cat. (Prior to introducing the animal into the home, researchers checked that the felines possessed calm temperaments and fit in well with the family.)

Parents reported an immediate bond between their child with autism and the new pet. Furthermore, they shared that this connection remained strong over time and steadily reduced youngsters' anxiety.

Gretchen Carlisle, PhD, a research scientist at the MU Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction in the MU College of Veterinary Medicine, suggested that the children benefited from the relationship because the cats accepted them unconditionally.

"Some children with autism may have sensory issues or be sensitive to loud noises, so a cat may be an appropriate, comforting pet for some families due to their calming presence," Carlisle explained.

Carlisle believes companion animals, such as cats, can help improve youngsters' mental health and help reduce stress for parents coping with a child's autism. In addition, "cats might be more beneficial than dogs to some families," Carlisle noted.

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