Can Pets Improve Kids' Health?

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A number of small-scale studies have suggested that pets boost children's overall health. But new findings published in the journal Anthrozoös, from the largest-ever inquiry, reveal that isn't the case, reports Medical News Today.

For the study, researchers at RAND Corporation reviewed data from the 2003 California State Health Interview Survey to determine the link between children's health and ownership of family pets. The data included 2,336 households with either a dog or cat versus 2,955 households without these furry friends. Scientists then focused on those families with at least one child between age 5 and 11.

In addition, researchers looked at the overall health and well-being of the children, whether individuals were diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and whether the parents voiced specific concerns about their children. Scientists also accounted for more than 100 variables that could influence the study's results, such as family income, language skills and the type of housing children lived in.

Findings showed that children in families with a pet tended to be in better general health and more likely to be physically active compared with kids in families that didn't own a pet. Additionally, researchers noted that children with pets were more likely to suffer from ADHD and less likely to have parents that worried about their mood, feelings, behavior and ability to learn.

But after the study authors adjusted for several factors that might connect pet ownership with better health among kids, they concluded that there was no statistically significant link between the two, meaning that any correlation initially observed was likely driven by chance.

"We could not find evidence that children from families with dogs or cats are better off either in terms of their mental well-being or their physical health," said Layla Parast, PhD, MS, a statistician at RAND and a coauthor of the study. "Everyone on the research team was surprised—we all have or grew up with dogs and cats. We had essentially assumed from our own personal experiences that there was a connection."

According to Parast, to better measure possible connections between pets and children's health in the future, scientists would need more detailed information about how long a family owned a pet and how much interaction the child had with the pet as well as data on kids' long-term health outcomes.

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