How Dogs Help Children with Autism

Autism is a complex neurological and developmental condition that begins early in life and affects how a person interacts, communicates and learns. Autism is highly-individualized and everyone with autism experiences it differently, which is why autism is often described as occurring on a spectrum.

A growing body of research demonstrates that interaction with dogs can positively impact children with autism, particularly for improved communication, mental health, and classroom learning.

Dogs Help Develop Communication Skills

Research shows children with autism who have a pet dog perform better in social situations, express more assertiveness\(^1\), and exhibit increased prosocial behaviors like sharing and empathy\(^2\). According to HABRI-funded research, incorporating therapy dogs in social skills training may help children exhibit improved social communication\(^3\), and interventions with a therapy dog may improve communication in hospitalized youth with autism\(^4\).

Dogs Improve Mental Health

Pet dogs may serve as an important buffer for teens with autism and caring for a dog may facilitate better social-emotional adjustment for this population\(^5\). Service dogs have been shown to decrease anxiety and anger and increase calmness in children with autism\(^6\). Service dogs\(^7\) and pet dogs\(^8\) can also reduce caregiver stress in families of children with autism.

Dogs Support Classroom Learning

The presence of a therapy dog in the classroom can benefit students with autism, including improving social skills and reducing problem behaviors\(^9\). Students with autism interact with their peers more in the presence of a therapy dog, which can facilitate learning\(^10\). Reading to a dog can also have a positive effect on children’s motivation and attitude toward reading\(^11\).

For more information about the benefits of dogs for people with autism and the science of the human-animal bond, please visit www.habri.org.