

# 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<sup>1</sup>, and exhibit increased prosocial behaviors like sharing and empathy<sup>2</sup>. According to HABRI-funded research, incorporating therapy dogs in social skills training may help children exhibit improved social communication<sup>3</sup>, and interventions with a therapy dog may improve communication in hospitalized youth with autism<sup>4</sup>.

## 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<sup>5</sup>. Service dogs have been shown to decrease anxiety and anger and increase calmness in children with autism<sup>6</sup>. Service dogs<sup>7</sup> and pet dogs<sup>8</sup> 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<sup>9</sup>. Students with autism interact with their peers more in the presence of a therapy dog, which can facilitate learning<sup>10</sup>. Reading to a dog can also have a positive effect on children's motivation and attitude toward reading<sup>11</sup>.

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](http://www.habri.org).