

Animal Influence

By Chris Hayhurst

From trained therapy dogs to common house pets, animals can help us in many ways.

It was just another school day in Albert Lea, Minn., but on this day, in this class, Jack* was in trouble. In the past, among his peers, Jack had difficulty controlling his emotions at school. Ask him a question, and he'd become flustered or angry; try to get him involved, and he'd just shut down. This day, unfortunately, was no different. As Jack's classmates began their latest group activity, as one kid after another seemed to need his attention, it was happening once again. Jack was about to blow.

As his temper began to flare, Jack rose from his seat. He walked up to his teacher and reached into his pocket. Then, slowly, he did it: He handed her a ticket.

"It's a way for him to cope when he feels upset," explains the school's social worker, Kim Anderson. "Instead of using words, he just gives that ticket to his teacher, and he can leave to go see Poet."

Poet? "He's my dog," says Anderson. "A golden retriever." Poet, in fact, is a registered therapy dog. While he lives with Anderson on her farm, and he loves cats and especially playing fetch, Poet also has a job. And on this particular day, when the steaming student came in with his ticket, he did it to perfection. "I have this quiet corner in my office with beanbag chairs," says Anderson. "And so he came in and sat down, and Poet went right over to him." Within 10 seconds, says Anderson, Jack was smiling. "Within 15 minutes, he was able to process the situation and talk about his feelings and return to class."

**Name has been changed.*

Paw Power

Poet's ability to heal—in this case, to help an upset student relax and talk—comes as no surprise to animal experts such as Gail Melson. "There is very good evidence that being with a calm and friendly dog lowers blood pressure and reduces feelings of stress," says Melson, a developmental psychologist and researcher at Purdue University in Indiana. "And when we reduce the stress in our lives, we're healthier." Well-behaved pets and trained therapy

animals have the same effect, she says. "The animal doesn't really need to do anything. It's their presence that matters."



Courtesy Of Equi-kids Therapeutic Riding Program

Volunteers at EQUI-KIDS make riding safe for kids with special needs.

Therapy dogs, notes Melson, are used in all kinds of situations, from classrooms for the learning disabled to long-term care facilities where people receive personal and medical assistance around the clock. Even in school libraries, she says, trained dogs are increasingly being used to help self-conscious students feel comfortable reading aloud. With a dog by their side, explains Melson, the stress some students experience when they read in front of a teacher tends to just melt away. "Animals don't ask anything of you," she says. "There's that feeling of unconditional acceptance." House pets have a similar influence, says Melson. "They provide much of the same emotional and social support that we get from having people in our lives, like friends and family, who are close to us. We can't say that if you get sick a pet will help you recover faster. But it may make things easier, and in some respects it may do a better job than a person."

That has been Redmond, Wash., ninth grader Lulu T.'s experience exactly. Her Portuguese water dog, Daisy Mei, is a 30-pound fluff ball that Lulu describes as unbelievably gentle. Daisy Mei loves to cuddle, says Lulu, and is a great companion on days when she's feeling down, "especially after I do poorly on a test or something like that."

Six months ago, Lulu, Daisy Mei, and Lulu's father completed an intensive therapy-dog training program offered by a national organization called the Delta Society. Now, says Lulu, her favorite canine companion wears a badge

that identifies her as an official therapy dog, and she and Daisy Mei spend at least one day a week visiting either special-education students at her school or elderly patients at a nearby hospital. "This one girl we saw, she would never smile, never talk," recalls Lulu. "And then one day I brought Daisy Mei in and everything changed—she started laughing; she told her to sit. It was amazing."

At the hospital, says Lulu, she's seen similar results. "We'll walk up to a person's bed, or to their chair, and Daisy Mei will just sit there, and I'll tell her it's OK to be pet by this person, and the patient will lean down and pet her and start talking and smiling. You can see the change in the patient right away—it's like this physiological response. It's really cool to watch."

"When you're with a loving animal," explains psychologist and animal-assisted therapy expert Aubrey Fine, "real biological changes take place." It doesn't matter whether it's a dog, a cat, or even a pet lizard, notes Fine, who is a professor at California Polytechnic State University. If you're in a comfortable setting, and an animal shows you affection, the effects will most likely be the same: reduced heart rate, reductions in a stress-related hormone called cortisol, and an increase in a happiness-related neurotransmitter chemical called serotonin. Those healthy changes—in addition to the kinds of changes that Lulu sees in all the people Daisy Mei meets—happen thanks to the emotional bonds we experience with animals, says Fine. "Whether it's a trained therapy dog or your pet, it's that connection that matters."

Horse Help

At EQUI-KIDS Therapeutic Riding Program in Virginia Beach, Va., making that human-animal connection is the point; only here, the animals are horses, and the kids have special needs. Many are autistic, says program director Kathy Chitwood. "Others have cerebral palsy. Some have Down syndrome; some have had strokes or cancer or blood disorders. Some are developmentally delayed, and many are from the foster system."

The program uses 18 highly trained horses, says Chitwood. The smallest is a pony the size of a big dog, while the largest is a draft horse—a breed so strong it's often used to pull plows across fields. When students ride, they do so with the help of several assistants. "Side walkers" offer support for the rider from the ground on either side of the horse. Another person leads the horse by its reins. And then there's a physical therapist, an occupational therapist, or a speech therapist—a healthcare professional who guides the rider through special exercises tailored to his or her needs. For someone accustomed to being in a wheelchair, says Chitwood, sitting on a horse as

it's led around a ring creates the sensation of walking. Riding also builds confidence and core strength, she says. And for autistic individuals especially, time with a horse improves their ability to respond to directions and to express their emotions. "One man told us he'd never seen his son smile before," says Chitwood. "And then he came here and rode on a horse, and he smiled—for the first time."

Get Involved

If you have a pet that you think would make a great therapy animal, start with the Delta Society. The group's Pet Partners program trains volunteers and their pets to visit libraries, schools, hospitals, and other facilities. The certification program that Washington teen Lulu T. and her dog, Daisy Mei, went through, Healing Paws, requires participants to receive 40 hours of training. It's a lot of work, says Lulu, but it's definitely worth it. "It's pretty intensive. You're in the class every day, and there are different scenarios you go through—interacting with patients, riding on elevators, those kinds of things. And then you get tested. It's hard, but it's also fun."

Learn more:

Delta Society (therapy, service, and companion animals):
www.deltasociety.org

Professional association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International
(equine- assisted therapy): www.pathintl.org

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What biological effect is present when an animal shows a person affection in a comfortable setting?

- A decreased heart rate
- B increase in the hormone cortisol
- C decrease in the neurotransmitter serotonin
- D increased blood pressure

2. Which of the following statements *describes* a reaction that someone had to a therapy animal in the passage?

- A A student felt less relaxed and had difficulty controlling his emotions.
- B A sick patient recovered faster from an illness.
- C An elderly patient became sad and depressed.
- D A self-conscious student felt comfortable reading aloud.

3. Review the picture of the therapy horse and volunteer. What adjective could be used to best describe the volunteer?

- A impatient
- B caring
- C rude
- D self-conscious

4. Read the following sentence: "Daisy Mei loves to cuddle, says Lulu, and is a great companion on days when she's feeling down, 'especially after I do poorly on a test or something like that.'"

The word **companion** means

- A friend
- B boss
- C owner
- D stranger

5. The primary purpose of this passage is to

- A convince pet owners to take their dogs to therapy training to get certified
- B persuade schools to have a dog in the building for kids with special needs
- C describe how a therapy animal helps people with many types of problems
- D compare and contrast therapy animals with regular pets

6. What effect can a therapy dog have on an upset student like Jack?

7. How might a therapy animal be able to give better emotional and social support than a person?

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Jack became flustered in class _____ he handed his teacher a ticket and visited the therapy dog, Poet.

- A because
- B so
- C yet
- D but

9. Answer the questions based on the sentence below.

The animal doesn't need to do anything because it's their presence that matters.

Who? the animal

(does) What? _____

Why? _____

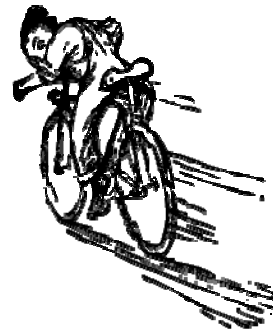
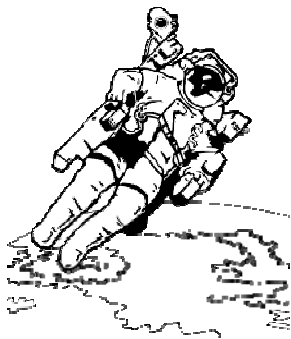
10. Read the vocabulary word and definition below and complete questions 10a, 10b, and 11.

Vocabulary Word: accustomed (ac · cus · tomed): to be used to something.

10a. Read the five sentences below and underline the word **accustomed** in each sentence.

1. The boy didn't like the girl at first, but as he grew accustomed to her personality, he began to fall in love with her.
2. The students had become accustomed to doing homework every night for the class, so when the teacher was out sick, they were surprised not to have homework.
3. It was a big change moving from the big city to the small town, but after 5 years, the family was accustomed to a different style of life.
4. It took a minute for their eyes to adjust to the light once the miners walked into the sunlight, as their eyes had become accustomed to the dark mine.
5. As people became accustomed to texting on their phones instead of calling each other, very few people spoke on the phone anymore!

10b. Which experience would you need to get more accustomed to?



11. Would you need to get accustomed to someone who speaks with a foreign accent? Why or why not?

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 1050

Passage Text Structure: Descriptive – the writer explains, defines or illustrates a concept or topic

Passage Summary: “Animal Influence” focuses on therapy animals and how they can help people with a variety of social, emotional or physical problems. Experiences of those helped by therapy animals as well as that of a therapy animal owner are included.

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- A A student felt less relaxed and had difficulty controlling his emotions.
- B A sick patient recovered faster from an illness.
- C An elderly patient became sad and depressed.
- D **A self-conscious student felt comfortable reading aloud.**

3. Review the picture of the therapy horse and volunteer. What adjective could be used to best describe the volunteer?

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4. Read the following sentence: “Daisy Mei loves to cuddle, says Lulu, and is a great companion on days when she’s feeling down, ‘especially after I do poorly on a test or something like that.’”

In the sentence the word **companion** means

- A **friend**
- B boss
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5. The primary purpose of this passage is to

- A convince pet owners to take their dogs to therapy training to get certified
- B persuade schools to have a dog in the building for kids with special needs
- C **describe how a therapy animal helps people with many types of problems**
- D compare and contrast therapy animals with regular pets

6. What effect can a therapy dog have on an upset student like Jack?

Suggested answer: Jack was upset, and 10 seconds after Poet went over to him, he was smiling. After 15 minutes sitting with Poet, he was able to talk about his feelings, process the situation and go back to class. In paragraph 5, evidence is given that a calm, friendly dog lowers blood pressure and reduces stress. [paragraphs 4, 5]

7. How might a therapy animal be able to give better emotional and social support than a person?

Suggested answer: The passage describes how animals don't ask anything of you and accept you unconditionally. That acceptance without asking anything in return can really put people at ease. A person also may not be as present as an animal in the moment when they are caring or listening to a patient, because they have other things on their mind, or they are trying to analyze the progress of the patient. [paragraph 6]

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

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- B so
- C yet
- D but

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

The animal doesn't need to do anything because it's their presence that matters.

Who? the animal

(does) What? **not need to do anything**

Why? **because it's their presence that matters**

10. ReadWorks recommends that you teach this vocabulary word to the whole class out loud using the four steps listed below.

Vocabulary Word: accustomed

Step 1: Introduce the word

- a. Teacher writes the word on the board and divides it into syllables: (ac · cus · tomed)
- b. Teacher says: "This word is accustomed. What is the word?" [All students reply together out loud: "accustomed."]

Step 2: Provide a child-friendly definition

- a. Teacher says: "The word accustomed means to be used to something."
- b. Teacher says: "In the passage, the author describes the experience of riding a horse for someone accustomed to being in a wheelchair."
- c. Teacher says: "What is the word?" [All students reply together out loud: "accustomed."]

Step 3: Practice the word

Teacher provides examples and additional opportunities to repeat the word. Read the 1st sentence out loud to your students. Begin reading it again and when you come to the vocabulary word prompt students to say the vocabulary word out loud. Then, finish reading the sentence out loud to your students.

- 10a.**
1. The boy didn't like the girl at first, but as he grew accustomed to her personality, he began to fall in love with her.
 2. The students had become accustomed to doing homework every night for the class, so when the teacher was out sick, they were surprised not to have homework.
 3. It was a big change moving from the big city to the small town, but after 5 years, the family was accustomed to a different style of life.
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 5. As people became accustomed to texting on their phones instead of calling each other, very few people spoke on the phone anymore!

Step 4: Check for student understanding

This step can be completed as a whole class activity or as an independent practice.

- 10b.** Which experience would you need to get more accustomed to?



- 11.** Would you need to get accustomed to someone who speaks with a foreign accent? Why or why not?

Suggested answer: Depending on how heavy their accent is, I may get quickly accustomed to their way of speaking but I would certainly need to get used to it at first in order to understand them

Suggested Additional Vocabulary: flustered, presence, self-conscious, unconditional, intensive, affection, certification