

Children, Play and Dogs

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Paws for Healing volunteers Meir Horvitz and canine therapist, Amos, have visited children in a variety of environments, most often in hospital waiting rooms or as patients in health-care facilities. Recently they were invited to the Davis Public Library for a summer program that gives youngsters a chance to learn more about everyday heroes in their community.

As a local hero (the poodle mix was given the American Red Cross Animal Aide Award), Amos was the perfect canine to demonstrate the powerful influence dogs have on people. The school children learned how to approach a strange dog safely, asking permission to touch the dog first and then extending their hand for a good sniff, and talked about how meeting Amos

made them feel "unanimously happy". Even those who were afraid at first wanted to see Amos and eventually touch him evidenced by the photos below.

One of the most important characteristics humans and canines share is a sense of playfulness that carries on into adulthood. Healthy play experience helps both dogs and children learn how to act appropriately with one another, to form bonds with peers, and to work off extra energy. The lack of playtime, or play that resembles teasing, bullying or physical abuse, also has long-lasting consequences. For dogs, the experience can make them fearful, aggressive and distrusting of all other beings. For humans, it is much the same, and can have serious, even criminal consequences.



One of the first researchers to study play behavior in humans is Stuart L. Brown, a retired psychiatrist. In his article, "Animals at Play", he describes the positive affects of play on the healthy development of young animals and humans, and the implications of the absence of play in normal childhood development. His experience with abused children who become violent adults began dramatically with Charles Whitman, a 25-year-old student at University of Texas, Austin. In 1966 he gunned down 44 people from the school's bell tower, killing 31 of them. He had been a model student, Marine, Eagle Scout and altar boy; he had also been physically abused repeatedly as a young boy by his father and developed no play relationships in school.

Brown's investigation into Whitman's past revealed that as a child, he had been a "frightened little kid who never played spontaneously, who often slumped against a wall in the school yard while others had fun. Outside school, Charlie's father controlled him so completely that the boy had virtually no time to play, even by himself" (11-12).

Further research Brown did reinforced the importance of play: out of 26 convicted murderers, 90% demonstrated either no play behavior, or behavior that was inappropriate, such as bullying, sadism, extreme teasing, or cruelty to animals. Out of 25 drunk drivers who had either killed someone or were killed in a crash, 75% had experienced little or no positive play during their childhood. While Brown is careful to say that problems with childhood play patterns is not necessarily the cause of antisocial or criminal behavior, he does write that, "It made me realize what a powerful, positive force play is. Play is an important part of a healthy, happy childhood and playful adults are often highly creative, even brilliant individuals" (12).

In addition to enhancing play experiences, pet companionship can alleviate a child's feeling of loneliness or of unworthiness. Shared activities, such as walking, playing games, grooming or simply spending time together creates bonds of camaraderie and friendship. Research also shows that children who are disabled are more readily accepted by fellow students when they are accompanied by an assistance dog because of the dogs' normalizing presence. Other studies show that students, who are considered "different" from their peers, perhaps for having a learning disability, being introverted or physically awkward, for example, find

unconditional love and acceptance through a canine. That reassurance can bolster self-esteem and confidence in a youngster who finds it difficult to make friends.

Feeding, grooming and caring for dogs (or other pets) are ways that children can learn other important social abilities, too. While younger children should never be left alone with a dog, supervised brushing, play or reading to the family pet will help develop nurturing skills such as empathy, patience and kindness. Older children (at least 10 years of age) can feed a dog at home and take part in obedience classes. In turn, they can teach their younger siblings how to reward their pet when it sits or lies down on command. Modeling how a dog should be treated helps others to learn positive reinforcement techniques rather than punishment. For the canine, consistent human behavior reinforces the respect a dog should feel for its human companions.

If you are interested in reading more about Dr. Brown's findings, his research was published in the December, 1994 issue of the National Geographic. A delightful book that celebrates the relationship of a child and dog is Willie Morris', *My Dog Skip*, which was also made into a movie that is now available on DVD.