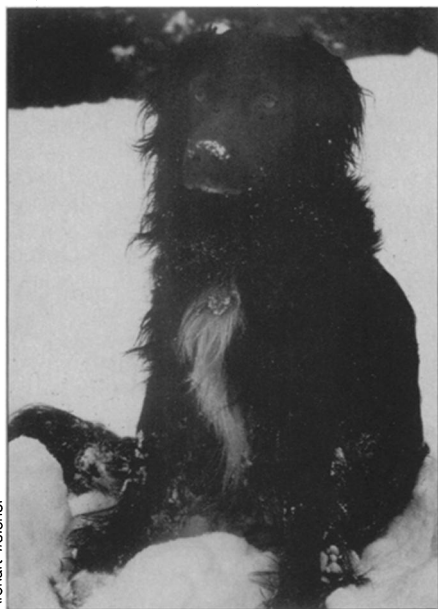


BY JOAN AREHART-TREICHEL

# Pets: The Health Benefits



Arehart-Treichel

Companion animals appear not only to help heal the sick, researchers report, but to make healthy people even healthier

In the early 1970s the World Dolphin Foundation in Miami invited parents and children to engage in water play with dolphins off Key Biscayne. During the next few months some 2,000 people took up the offer, and during that time Henry Truby, director of scientific research for the foundation, made this observation: Neurologically impaired persons responded exceptionally enthusiastically to dolphins, and vice versa.

In 1978, Truby, along with Betsy Smith (associate professor of social work at Florida International University in Miami) and Nancy Phillips (a consultant to the South Florida Society for Autistic Children), undertook a study to see whether dolphins might favorably alter the behavior of autistic children, who are usually withdrawn and uncommunicative. The study was comprised of six encounter sessions between a group of eight autistic children and three dolphins.

All of the children showed markedly prolonged attention spans in the presence of the dolphins, and several showed some other behavioral improvements as well. For instance, an 18-year-old autistic boy named Michael and another autistic youngster fed fish to the dolphins; autistic patients usually do not reach outside their immediate environments. Michael and another autistic boy also lifted a bucket of water and poured it over the dolphins; interactive play was new for both. And Michael started clicking sounds to get the dolphins' attention. The only other attempts at verbal communication he had ever made before were to utter the words "Dad" and "beer," and these he had said only 10 times or so.

Since then Smith has been exposing Michael to dolphins periodically, and as she reported this month at a meeting of the Society for Companion Animal Studies in Paris, the dolphins have brought about not only temporary but sustained changes in his behavior. For instance, he becomes animated whenever he sees dolphins; he grabs other people to draw their attention to dolphins; he finds pictures of dolphins in a book; he clicks at dolphins in television commercials and billboard ads. And most encouragingly, he has said the word

"Yep" five times within one week when asked whether he wanted to visit the dolphins.

The therapeutic effects of dolphins on autistic children are but one example of the growing scientific evidence that companion animals can benefit persons with mental or physical illnesses (SN: 10/8/77, p. 237; 12/9/78, p. 408). But companion animals can benefit the minds and bodies of healthy persons too, research is starting to reveal, and in some ways that even animal lovers might not suspect.

Attentiveness, for instance, appears to be one of the most important psychological benefits that pets provide humans. Sharon L. Smith, an ethologist at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine in Philadelphia, studied interactions between 10 pet dogs and their family members in their usual environments. As she reported at the first International Conference on the Human/Companion Animal Bond in Philadelphia last fall, one of the things she found was that the dogs paid a lot more attention to their family members than vice versa, indicating that the dogs were attentive whether people paid attention to them or not.

Then James Serpell, an animal behaviorist at the University of Cambridge, England, went on to find, after interviewing 25 dog owners about those characteristics they found most desirable in their pets, that attentiveness was one of the ones they prized most. This really isn't surprising, Serpell pointed out at the same meeting, since psychologists have recognized for some time that attentiveness in the form of eye contact is important in human relationships.

"Welcoming" behavior is another psychological benefit that pets bring to people, Serpell's study reveals. The dog owners he interviewed rated it along with attentiveness as one of the characteristics that they valued most in their pets.

This finding, too, is not really surprising, Serpell contends, because while the significance of greeting behavior among humans has not been studied to any extent, greeting behavior does occur among many animal species and appears to help

cement social and sexual bonds among them.

Having someone to talk to is yet a third psychological contribution that pets make to people, research is showing. In a study of dog owners, Aaron H. Katcher, a physician at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, and colleagues found that 98 percent spent time talking to their dogs, 75 percent thought their dogs were sensitive to their moods and feelings, and 28 percent even confided in their dogs.

"Without being irreverent," Katcher declared at the Philadelphia conference, "it is possible to think about the similarities of the comforts of prayer and the comforts of talking to an animal. Prayer is frequently accompanied by sensual enrichment such as incense, music, special body postures, the touch of folded hands or rosary beads, just as dialogue with an animal is accompanied by the enrichment of touch, warmth and odor. In both instances the talk is felt to be 'understood.'"

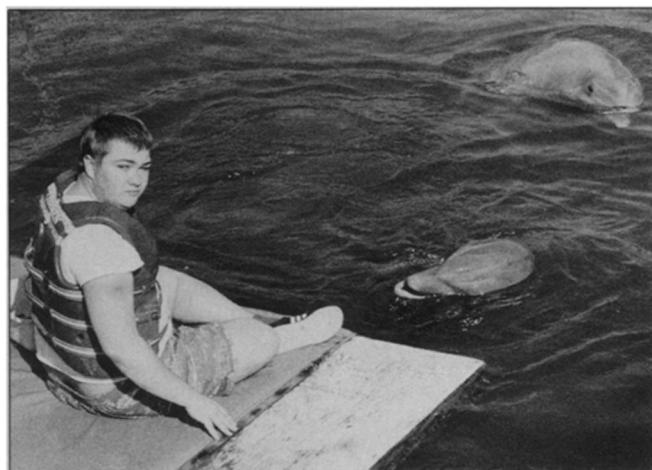
As might be expected, pets also seem to provide special psychological benefits for children. Katcher points out that children are often given dogs after they have had considerable experience with stuffed animals, and that both stuffed animals and dogs serve as transitional objects that allow children to move from loving their parents to loving other people.

Similarly, Barbara Jones of the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine interviewed horse owners ages 5 to 11 to find out why they liked horses. One of the major reasons, she reported at the conference, was that horses provided them with an opportunity for nurturing, and that they often perceived their horses as helpless and childlike.

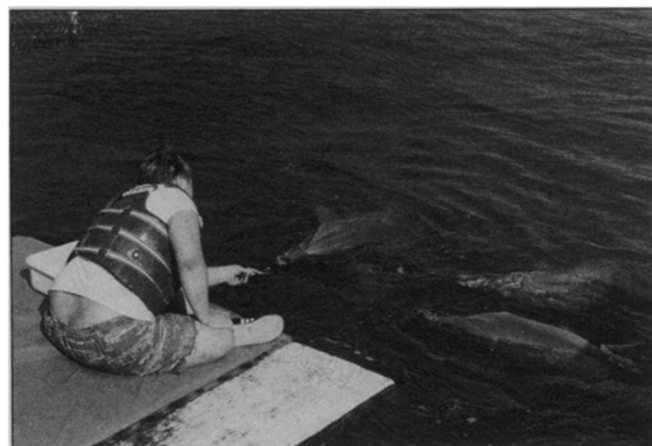
Also expectedly, teenagers appear to reap special psychological rewards from pets. Michael Robin and co-workers at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health in Minneapolis queried some 500 teenagers from high schools, state correctional facilities or psychiatric hospitals about the role that pets had played in their lives. As he reported at the conference, 91 percent of them had had a pet at one time or another, and the pets ranged from dogs



Smith, at left, motions to attentive dolphin as Michael, an autistic patient, observes the interactions from the edge of the water.

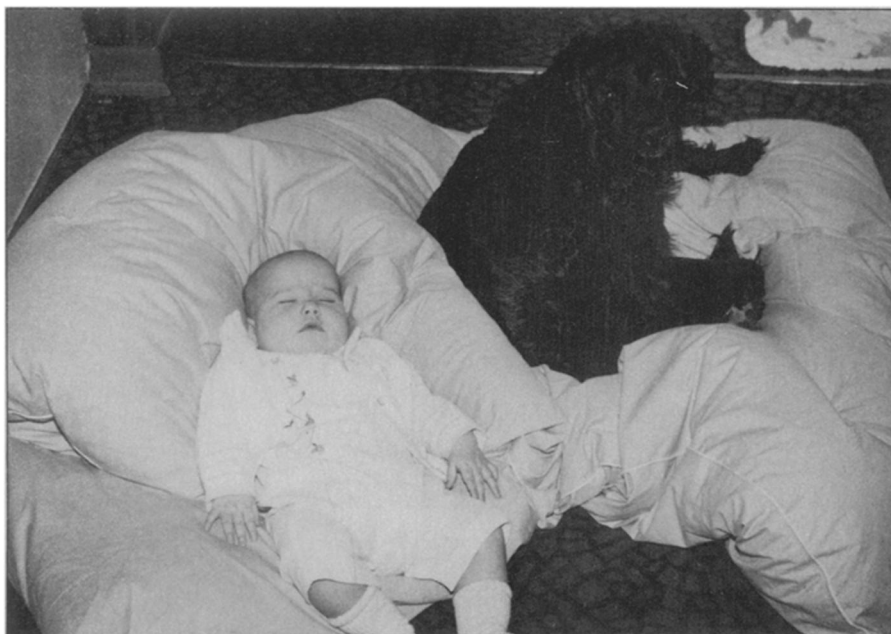


The two dolphins swim playfully and encourage a response from Michael.



Their efforts are rewarded as Michael emerges from withdrawn state to feed the dolphins. Autistic patients characteristically do not engage in such behavior.

Dogs pay a lot more attention to family members than vice versa, and attentiveness appears to be one of the most important psychological benefits that they provide humans.



touching. Of the dog-people interactions that Smith observed, hand contact (rubbing, scratching, patting or stroking) was the most prominent and as prevalent among men as women, indicating that dogs provide a socially acceptable outlet for touching — something that American men are reluctant to engage in.

For another, pets facilitate social interactions with strangers. Peter R. Messent of the Animal Studies Centre, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire, England studied this in pet dogs. Eight dog owners were recruited and asked to do two similar walks through part of Hyde Park and some of the surrounding streets, once with their dog and once without. An observer followed, recording the responses of all people who passed within five feet of the walker or his dog.

The dog owners, Messent reported at last fall's conference, experienced a significantly larger number of responses from people if they were with their dogs than if they were not. Owners also engaged significantly more often in long conversations when their dogs were present than when they were not. And while there was a direction toward pedigree dogs increasing social interactions, this direction was not statistically significant. Also, there was no difference in length of conversation with passersby whether the dog was a pedigree breed or not.

In fact, companion animals even seem to act as social catalysts within families. Katcher points to the case of one woman who was never able to talk to her father directly, but who could make contact if his dog was present. First she would talk to her father about the dog, and after a dialogue had been established, would bring the conversation around to the subject she wanted to discuss.

Companion animals can also bring families closer together and lessen family tension. Ann Ottney Cain, professor of psychiatric nursing at the University of Maryland in Baltimore, studied the sociological impact of pets (from the usual dogs and cats to more exotic animals such as skunks, goats and monkeys) on 60 families and reported at the conference that a number of the families experienced increased closeness, more time playing together and less arguing after they had



and cats to horses, rabbits, snakes, hamsters, gerbils, rats, birds, turtles and fish. Ninety-seven percent of the pet owners said they had liked or loved their pet very much, considering it, for example, "a best friend," "there no matter what" or "a security blanket"; 61 percent from psychiatric hospitals, 47 percent from correctional facilities and 29 percent from high schools thought that one of the most important things a pet provided a young person was "someone to love." In fact, for delinquents and emotionally disturbed youngsters, a pet had often been their sole love object. As one 18-year-old delinquent boy reported, "My kitty was the joy of my life. It never hurt me or made me upset like my parents."

Yet more surprisingly, pets seem to bestow even more psychological rewards on adults, and especially on adults without children, than they do on young children and teenagers. In her study, Smith found that while young children interacted with dogs, older children and adults — particularly those without children — interacted even more with them.

Companion animals are likewise being found to provide humans with sociological benefits. For one, they give men as well as women a socially acceptable outlet for

Both stuffed animals and pets serve as transitional objects that allow children to move from loving their parents to loving other people.

gotten their pets. One woman even used the family dog to cool family arguments; "Stop fighting, you're upsetting the dog" was her favorite comment.

Although the physiological benefits of pets have scarcely been tapped, one has been well documented so far — they can lower people's blood pressure. This was one of the more unforeseen health benefits of companion animals. Katcher and his colleagues measured the blood pressures of dog owners while they were reading an uninteresting text, then while they were vigorously greeting their pets with pats, strokes and words.

The subjects' blood pressures were found to be significantly lower during the greeting than during the reading. Similarly, when people in a veterinary clinic consulting room were talking to their pets, they had lower blood pressures than while talking to the experimenter, Katcher and his team found, and children brought into a neighboring home had lower blood pressures when a dog was with the experimenter than when the experimenter was alone. Katcher even found that if people gazed at a tankful of tropical fish, it lowered their blood pressure, particularly if they had high blood pressure.

Since research into companion animal-human relationships is in its infancy, other ways that companion animals benefit humans' health will undoubtedly become apparent during the next few years, Boris M. Levinson, a psychologist with Yeshiva University in New York City, pointed out at the conference.

For instance, do pets make people feel more comfortable in their sex roles than they would otherwise be? Can pets reduce spouse battering, child abuse or other criminal behaviors? Do different kinds of companion animals provide health benefits that others do not? (One might expect, for instance, that cats offer certain inputs that dogs do not.) Might pets protect against the unhealthy mental and physical effects of stressful life events? Might pets even be able to extend life expectancy among healthy persons as well as among sick ones?

Companion animals, Katcher predicts, will be shown to have "an important influence on our sense of well-being and physical health."

## Telescopes from Celestron®

Will Take You To Places You've Never Been To Before  
• Versatile • World's Largest Selection • Supremely Affordable



With a Celestron, the modern standard of high quality, affordable telescope performance, you can explore the craters of the Moon, the rings of Saturn, twirling galaxies and glowing nebulae. You can easily use a Celestron to photograph and view terrestrial subjects.

All Celestron telescopes have laser-tested, diffraction limited optical systems with hand-figured optics made in the U.S.A.

Celestrons® are available from 1.2- to 14-inches in diameter including the world's most popular modern telescope, the versatile Celestron 8. And, remember, most 35mm cameras easily attach to the Celestron for photography.

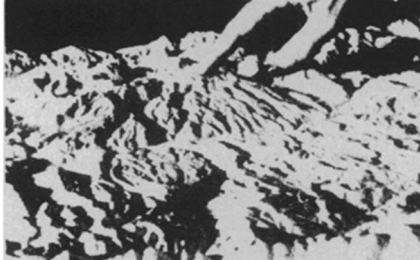
Free 8-page brochure or send \$3.00 for 52-page full-color catalog on how to select and use a Celestron telescope, telephoto lens.

**Celestron® International**

2835 Columbia St., (Box 3578-SN2), Torrance, CA 90503, U.S.A. Telephone: (213) 328-9560

Dealer inquiries invited.

### Mountains in miniature



### RAISED RELIEF MAPS

SHOW A LOT MORE... of the terrain of the eastern/western regions of the U. S. Mainland and Hawaii.

See the Adirondacks, Appalachians, Rockies, Sierras and other great outdoor areas in 3-D. Printed in 6 colors, these 22"x33" maps each represent approximately 70x110 miles and provide accurate visual information about:

Wooded areas — Mountains, hills and valleys  
Streams, lakes and reservoirs — Elevation contours — Political boundaries — Urban areas and roads — Landmarks.

Reference for: Fishing — hunting — skiing — camping — backpacking — flying.

Send coupon for free index map/order form.

**HUBBARD** P. O. Box 104  
Northbrook, IL 60062

Please send FREE descriptive information.

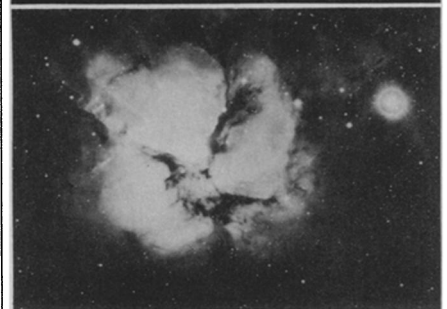
Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

(Dealer inquiries invited) SN

## THE COLORFUL HEAVENS



### The Trifid Nebula

—Just one of five beautiful full-color posters from photographs taken by the giant telescopes on Mt. Palomar. These posters, suitable for framing, measure 22½" x 29" and are mailed rolled.

- APS-19 North America Nebula
- APS-20 Veil Nebula
- APS-23 Orion Nebula
- APS-29 Trifid Nebula
- APS-33 Rosette Nebula

\$8.50 for three posters

\$13.00 for all five posters

- \$2.00 for complete catalog; credit applied toward next purchase.

Foreign orders add \$2.00 for postage

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

Send check or money order to:

**Hansen Planetarium**

DEPT. SN-B3 1098 South 200 West

Salt Lake City, Utah 84101

DEALER INQUIRIES WELCOME