

## Pet Therapy Lifts Back to School Blues

**Study finds cats, dogs in classrooms boost academic achievement.**

*By Soraya Gutierrez*

Posted: August 6, 2008 2 a.m. EDT

The presence of cats in the classroom can generate a relaxed environment. Hitting the books may be something children can start to look forward to at schools with pet programs in place, according to a study in the United Kingdom.

Contact with a live animal in the classroom, such as a cat or dog, results in children being more attentive and responsive in the presence of the animal to the teacher or therapist in the case of children with special needs, research has shown. Additionally, pet-owning children spend significantly more time in class at school than non pet-owning children, according to the study.

By introducing animals into schools, a range of educational benefits for the child can be observed. Pets in schools have shown to: Motivate students to learn and think. Encourage respect for life. Foster a sense of empathy and responsibility in children. Teach children how to nurture, care for and love all life. Lead to the development of hobbies and potential careers in animal care. Improve academic achievement.

Elementary school students interact with a classroom dog. For example, a study of 37 urban and rural elementary schools in Australia monitored the effect of classroom cats and found that their presence calmed the children and increased class cohesiveness and the general atmosphere. The cats had a significant impact on children who had previously shown serious behavior problems, according to the study on human-animal interaction.

In the United States, dogs have proved to be effective reading partners. Trained therapy dogs often are used in programs where children read to the dog. The dogs appear to listen intently and in a nonjudgmental way. As a result, the children's reading skills can improve as their confidence builds.

The presence of cats and dogs in the classroom demonstrates that pets can generate a relaxed environment. John Foster, chairman of the Pet Health Council, said, "Children are universally naturally interested in animals. Parents and teachers can harness this interest to teach children important life skills and lessons."