

Partnership Encourages Human-Animal Interaction Studies

Researchers to focus on the role of pets in childhood and adolescence.

Posted: Jan. 12, 2009, 3 a.m. EST

The role that pets play in the life of a child was the focus of a recent workshop studying the human-animal bond. The role that cats and dogs play in childhood and adolescence was the focus of a recent workshop to boost research on the interaction between pets and people.

Scientists involved in Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) studies and related fields gathered to discuss current research and identify key issues for further study, according to Mars Inc., the pet food producer. The Waltham Centre for Pet Nutrition, a division of Mars, sponsored the workshop, along with the National Institutes of Health's Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

Entitled "Directions in Human-Animal Interaction Research: Child Development, Health and Therapeutic Interventions," the workshop was the first to specifically analyze the role of pets in childhood and adolescence, according to organizers.

While growing evidence points to the health benefits of pet ownership in adults, comparatively little research has been done on the role pets play in the growth, health and development of children, and how the bonds formed from this interaction can be used in therapeutic settings, organizers said.

The researchers reviewed recent human-animal interaction studies that found links between pet ownership and improved health. However, most of the studies focused on adults.

This workshop provided a chance to review information about the interaction of pets and children, and helped set goals for related research, said Cathie Woteki, Ph.D., Mars global director of scientific affairs.