

How helpful are support dogs for kids with autism?

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(HealthDay)—Therapy dogs may help some children with autism

improve their social skills, but this approach doesn't work in all cases, a new study finds.

Many people with autism have difficulty socializing with others, and previous research has suggested that [therapy dogs](#) can help children with autism feel more comfortable speaking with others and socializing.

In this study, University of Missouri researchers compared the willingness of children with autism to speak to a therapist when in the presence of a therapy dog, when they were able to earn time to play with the dog, or when they were able to earn time playing with a favorite toy.

Some of the children spoke with the therapist more often when the dog was present or when they could earn time to play with the dog, but others spoke more often when they earned time to play with a favorite toy.

The findings, published recently in the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, show that while [therapy dogs](#) can improve the [social skills](#) of children with autism, using the animals shouldn't be regarded as a blanket approach, the researchers said.

"The [autism spectrum](#) is incredibly broad, so what might be an effective intervention technique for one child might not necessarily be the best option for another," said study co-author Courtney Jorgenson, a doctoral student in the university's College of Arts and Science.

"With so many different options available, this research can help parents make the best choices for their child," Jorgenson added in a university news release.

She advised that parents of children with autism should talk with their doctor to determine if a therapy dog is the best option for their child, and not assume these dogs will benefit every child in the same way.

Children with autism tend to have higher rates of anxiety and depression. Therapy dogs may help reduce their stress and make them feel more comfortable socializing, according to Jorgenson.

"Petting a dog can raise your oxytocin levels, the same hormone that gets released when you hug a loved one," Jorgenson said. "There's a long way to go in figuring out how dogs can best support [children](#) on the [autism](#) spectrum, but this research can help identify which kids might benefit the most."

More information: The Autism Society has more on [autism](#).

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