



guide to...
pets

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The Global Standard for
Equine Assisted Psychotherapy
& Personal Development

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Pets are good for you, physically and socially

There's substantial evidence to support the long-held belief that 'pets are good for us'. Dr Deborah Wells (Queen's University Belfast: see also tinyurl.com/petsvalue) says that 'stroking your pet can lower your heart-rate and blood pressure, and simply being around an animal can bolster mental wellbeing by enhancing self-esteem and perceptions of self-worth'. Dogs can serve as particularly strong social catalysts, improving health indirectly by facilitating interactions with other people. Meeting others on walks and 'playdates' can offer enormous benefits for both pet and owner!

Tip: Cuddle on the sofa *and* get out and about... it's good for your pet and for you too!



2

Dogs can help you read

The presence of a friendly dog has been shown to improve the speed and accuracy in which young children complete mental and physical tasks. Dr Sophie Hall (University of Lincoln) says: 'There is increasing interest in the value of "reading with dogs" schemes in schools. We don't know *why* reading with a dog helps, but it's thought that the presence of a dog can reduce anxiety, and increase motivation, confidence, engagement and feelings of support.'



Tip: If your child struggles with reading, encourage them to read with you and your dog, if your dog is happy to sit in!

3

Don't underestimate your cold-blooded chum

Reptiles are often thought to be sluggish and unintelligent, but Dr Anna Wilkinson (University of Lincoln) says new evidence suggests this is far from the case. 'Lizards can learn from each other and tortoises can solve complex mazes. They can even remember information for (at least) 18 months! This is important because animal welfare is influenced by our understanding of an animal's intelligence; being clever suggests that you have a greater capacity to suffer. That is why we need to keep our reptiles in the best way possible, not just meeting their basic needs but giving them things to do in their enclosure.'

Tip: Watch your animal. Signs might be subtle, but when you look at their behaviour closely you may begin to understand how they are feeling.



4

Unusual pets need unusual care

Dr Zoe Demery, Second Nature Animal Behaviour Counselling, says parrots are becoming one of the most popular pets in the UK – but many don't realise just how much care they need. Increasingly, parrots are being referred by their vets to clinical behaviourists for serious behaviour problems, such as feather plucking, aggression or extreme vocalisation. She adds: 'Parrots are highly sensitive, intelligent and sociable creatures, but unlike dogs they are often only a couple of generations removed from their wild type. Like other exotic pets, it's very important to consider the particular species' natural world. On top of this, exotic pet owners should think about what the needs of their particular individual are too.'

Tip: Ask your vet for advice to ensure all your exotic pet's needs are fulfilled as they would be in the wild.

5

Are dogs really as intelligent as three-year-olds?

Behavioural biologist Dr Marie Nitzschner tells us that while it is often said that dogs are as intelligent as children, the facts aren't straightforward. She says: 'In some cognitive domains, dogs indeed challenge the performance of two- or three-year-old human children. For example, they are very good in understanding human communicative cues. In this particular area, they even outperform great apes, our closest living relatives. But if we look at different domains – such as the understanding of causal relationships or the understanding of others' intentions – dogs do not perform very well.'

Tip: Bear in mind that while the cognitive abilities of dogs are similar to those of human infants in some domains they aren't in others.



6

Don't assume your cat hates you

While cats may be famous for their seemingly aloof and independent nature, they can in fact form very strong attachments to humans. Claudia Edwards (National Autonomous University of Mexico) told us that while most animals can be classed as either social or solitary, cats have their own social types – plastic or adaptable. Edwards added: 'This means that cats can live in groups, even dividing tasks like nannies, or they can live alone. When you spend time with a cat and play with it, especially with indoor cats, you can develop a very significant attachment bond.'

Tip: Spend enough time with your cat to form a strong bond.



7

Talk nicely to your pooch

Dr Márta Gácsi (Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary) points to convincing evidence that in many situations dogs' social responses more closely resemble those of human infants than chimpanzees' responses do. She says: 'Most recent brain activation data show that dogs do not simply rely on our tone of voice when we talk to them. Similar to humans, they prefer to use their left hemisphere to process meaningful words, independent of intonation, and activate a right-hemisphere brain area to process intonation. They even use the same brain region for processing emotional vocalisations (non-speech sounds) from both dogs and humans.'

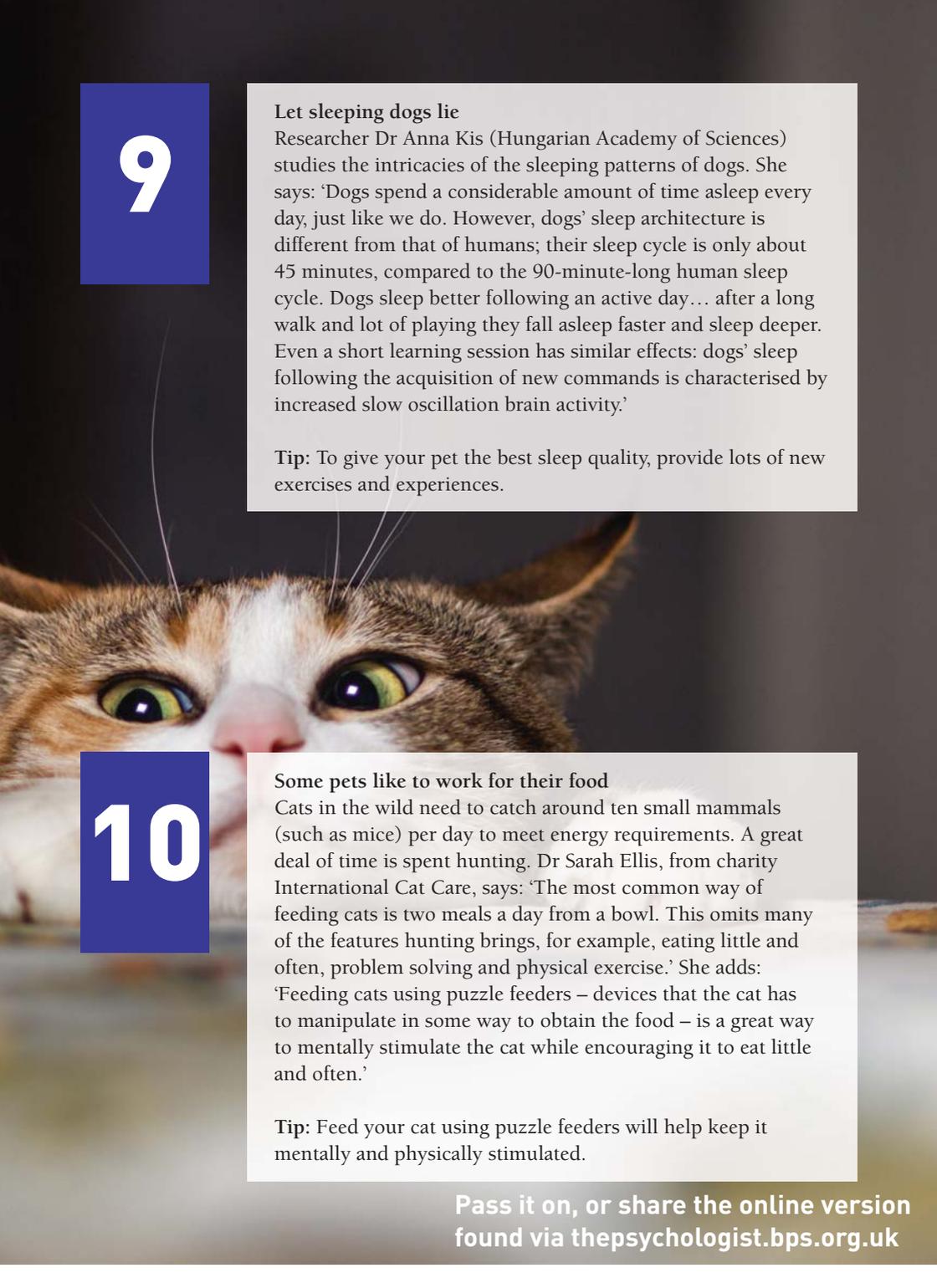
Tip: Be careful when talking to your dog – they might understand more than you think!

8

Paws for thought

Dr Sarah Millsopp, Lecturer in Animal Behaviour and Welfare (University of Chester) explains that, just as in humans, cats can be right- or left-pawed. She says: 'Preferences for a particular paw develop around the age of one year. Male cats tend to prefer using their left paw for complex tasks, like retrieving food from a jar, with females generally preferring the right paw. For simpler tasks, like grabbing a toy moving away from them, cats are more likely to show ambilateral behaviour or use either paw.'

Tip: To discover your own pet's paw preference, try presenting them with tasty treats they need to use their paws to access.



9

Let sleeping dogs lie

Researcher Dr Anna Kis (Hungarian Academy of Sciences) studies the intricacies of the sleeping patterns of dogs. She says: ‘Dogs spend a considerable amount of time asleep every day, just like we do. However, dogs’ sleep architecture is different from that of humans; their sleep cycle is only about 45 minutes, compared to the 90-minute-long human sleep cycle. Dogs sleep better following an active day... after a long walk and lot of playing they fall asleep faster and sleep deeper. Even a short learning session has similar effects: dogs’ sleep following the acquisition of new commands is characterised by increased slow oscillation brain activity.’

Tip: To give your pet the best sleep quality, provide lots of new exercises and experiences.

10

Some pets like to work for their food

Cats in the wild need to catch around ten small mammals (such as mice) per day to meet energy requirements. A great deal of time is spent hunting. Dr Sarah Ellis, from charity International Cat Care, says: ‘The most common way of feeding cats is two meals a day from a bowl. This omits many of the features hunting brings, for example, eating little and often, problem solving and physical exercise.’ She adds: ‘Feeding cats using puzzle feeders – devices that the cat has to manipulate in some way to obtain the food – is a great way to mentally stimulate the cat while encouraging it to eat little and often.’

Tip: Feed your cat using puzzle feeders will help keep it mentally and physically stimulated.

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