

# ADHD and Pet

by Elaine Taylor-Klaus

**IT'S A HUGE RESPONSIBILITY TO CARE FOR A DOMESTICATED ANIMAL.** With a family of five with ADHD, sometimes I wonder what we were thinking. After all, who needs another mouth to feed, much less one that can't communicate effectively when she's hungry?

Frankly, it's a mixed bag. On the one hand, I hate the feeling of not knowing if the dog was fed. The bowl is empty, but is she finished, or did someone forget? On the other hand, I can't imagine life without a four-legged dependent cruising around my house (though I might have to limit the bones lying around as my age advances—they're dangerous!).

In the end, the gifts of having a pet far exceed the challenges—even when the family has a heavy dose of ADHD.

When you have ADHD, your greatest challenge is to learn to live with it effectively. If managed with awareness, raising a pet can actually be a helpful support strategy for ADHD. It can provide:

- adults with **practice** before having a child
- kids with training in **responsible relationships**
- **accountability** for using systems and structures
- practice **managing impulsivity**
- comfort and **companionship** (and energy release)

## **Pets are good practice**

Raising a dog is a lot like raising a child, really. You are responsible for another living being, and for everyone and everything she or he touches. It requires emotional investment and significant resources (both time and money).

Shortly after we began our married life, my husband and I tested our parenting chops with an adorable puppy named Hobbie. We arranged our weekends around walks to the park and laughed endlessly about the antics of a puppy. We went to owner training school (let's be serious, we know who's really being trained!), and installed a doggie door to foster independence.

When Hobbie was six months old, we created Irish twins with the addition of a new puppy, Sasha. Those two lovely animals raised each other well, despite our nervous, hyperattentive new-parent overinvolvement. By the time our daughter was born, Sasha and Hobbie had trained us well to give ourselves over to the love of a child.

In a strange but genuine way, we felt at least somewhat ready to take on the awesome responsibility of raising a child. Do any new parents ever feel completely ready?

## **Training ground for responsible relationships**

To have a pet is to be in relationship with another being—and that requires skills all children can benefit from cultivating. A pet offers the chance for kids (and sometimes grownups) to care for another being who is completely dependent. It's an awesome obligation, if you think about it, like a tail-wagging, panting, magical training ground for responsible relationship building.

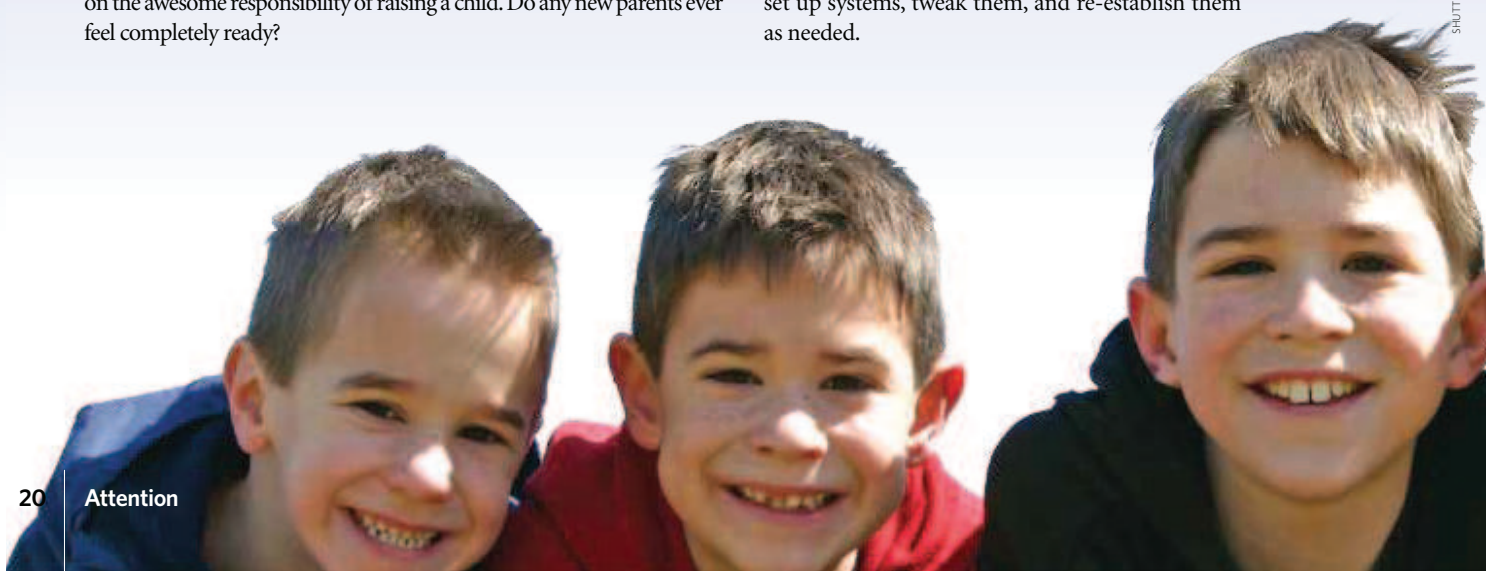
Now, I know there are some adults who just can't imagine having a pet—and that's fine. It's not for everyone. Like children, pets make noise, and messes, and need occasional emergency care. (Okay, I'm not so sure that turtles have ER visits, but my nephew's gecko did!) Caring for another being is not to be taken lightly, and I have immense respect for people who choose not to have a pet rather than manage the responsibility less than honorably.

But I will say that, if there is a part of you that is so inclined, or wonders if it's right for your family, it's worth exploring. There is something magical about exposing your children to an authentic relationship with another being who cannot speak to them, but is wholly dependent on your family for survival. Most pets require attention, interaction, and a sense of obligation to another. Any way you slice it, those are healthy life skills for people with ADHD to learn.

## **Structure and accountability**

Not only can kids cultivate relationships with pets, but they can learn to put systems and structures in place to care for them. Since kids with ADHD often have a difficult time finding the motivation to accomplish "boring" tasks, a pet offers the chance to make a household chore more "interesting." Let's be serious—feeding the dog is at least more compelling than washing the dishes!

In our home, our youngest child is expected to feed the dog before he feeds himself, twice a day. While our son is not yet completely independent in this task, it has provided a platform to teach him to set up systems, tweak them, and re-establish them as needed.



# Ownership

## Five Reasons to Include a Pet in Your Family

For example, recently we noticed our son had become a bit slack on remembering to feed the dog before himself. (This is common in ADHD world when systems become “boring” and difficult to continue). Keeping a note at his place at the table was no longer working, so we brainstormed together about how he could make sure he handled this task. (As if on cue, the dog looked up at him with soft brown eyes and tilted her head as if to say, “What about me?” It was perfect!).

Our son decided this time to draw a picture of a dog to keep at his place at the table as a reminder, along with a really funny Valentine’s Day card he got from the dog (I know—she’s quite a pet!). It’s too soon to say if it will work or not, but having to address this every so often is actually a great opportunity. It teaches him that his ADHD requires constant vigilance.

By learning to care for his dog—with a parental safety net so the dog doesn’t go hungry—our son is learning critical lessons about how his ADHD shows up, and what he’s going to need to do to manage it in his life.

### Managing impulsivity

As pet owners, we can’t afford to forget, for a moment, that our animals are just that—domesticated, maybe, but animals nonetheless. A girl and her dog can have the most wondrous relationship imaginable, but it is inherently dangerous. Success comes when you create a conscious environment and keep a safety mindset.

At one point, I had my doubts. There was a particular episode in Sasha’s youth when I was afraid we had made a big mistake. She had discovered a Brillo pad under the house and appeared with it in her mouth. I remember the face-off—nineteen years ago—as if it were yesterday—a Rottweiler’s jaws clamped tight, dribbles of pink bubbles sliding down the chin and dripping to the ground. A stalemate. It is hysterically funny in retrospect, but at the time I was just hysterically terrified.

I knew Sasha loved me, but would she bite me instinctively, protecting her precious Brillo pad? It was certainly within the realm of possibility.

As we raised our three kids—and several of our friends’ kids, too—into a household of dogs, we taught them to have a healthy respect for all animals, no matter how domesticated. My kids (and my husband) never met a dog that was a stranger, so we taught them to control their impulsivity quite directly:

- approach new dogs cautiously,
- ask permission of their owners, and
- hold out the backs of their hands to be sniffed

If I could be afraid of my dear Sasha, then anything was possible. My kids learned to proceed with caution before playfulness (not an easy task for a passel of kids with ADHD!). It’s worth noting, here, that my friendly, playful spouse had learned that lesson the hard way. In fact, you might say a big black chow

had to bite him in the butt to teach him how to teach his kids to manage their impulsivity.

### Comfort and companionship (and energy release)

True confession: Sometimes I get jealous of my dog. My kids talk to her and feed her. My husband plays with her on the floor. She gets the attention from those I love that I wish I got more often (okay, so my husband does feed me!). *And I wouldn’t have it any other way.*

There is a pure and healing energy that a well-loved animal brings into a home, sometimes coupled with a release for unbridled hyperactivity. Talk about a perfect recipe for ADHD success!

Pets invite us to take some time each day to relax and play. They offer friendship and companionship. They ask very little in return, except that we make the time to be with them, to be kind and playful, and to take care of their basic needs.

Pets teach us to:

- slow down
- pay attention to the fundamentals
- be kind
- enjoy life

Is there any more important teacher than that?

As an added benefit, some pets offer a physical outlet for excess energy. A great dog is willing to run, and wrestle, and roll around on the ground with the kids, and becomes a walking buddy and accountability partner for parents. In an ideal world, that dog is also willing to sit quietly at your feet as you do your homework. That kind of friendship can be hard to find.

### A special treat

I was talking with my son about this article, once again discussing a structure for making sure the dog is fed. He was starting to feel a little “wrong,” and I stopped the conversation to assure him that I think he’s doing a great job. I explained that it’s important to find structures that work for *him*, because we’re not always going to be around. To be successful, he’s going to **have to** learn to use systems to get done what he wants to get done. It was a great teachable moment.

And then... I had an “Aha! moment.” I realized that feeding the dog is one of the hardest tasks I could give to a child with ADHD. I’m always talking about improvement instead of perfection, but feeding an animal is the one place where perfection is actually important. A ninety percent isn’t good enough. And my son responded, simply, “Yeah, mom, but I can get points for extra credit. I can give her treats!”

Animals change the playing field when you have kids in your home. Having a pet invites children to learn to communicate on another plane. It’s one of those little gifts of life that is difficult to express, and can’t be overestimated in the peace and joy it can bring. 🐾

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