

31st August 2001

## ***Social cat-alysts give us paws for talk...and thought***

**Cats Protection Week: 8 – 15 September 2001**



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Finding friendship during a shopping trip for a tin of Felix could be a distinct possibility during Cats Protection Week (8 – 15 September, 2001).

In a recent UK study looking at the effect of cats and dogs as 'social catalysts', many cat owners reported that their feline had acted as a social ice-breaker. "Whilst it is known that people chat to others when out walking their dogs, casual conversations about our cats can also enhance our social networks," said researcher Dr June McNicholas of the University of Warwick (*McNicholas, J. and Collis, G.M. (2000). 'Dogs as catalysts for social interactions: robustness of the effect. British Journal of Psychology, 91, 61-70)*).

Judy Bernstein, Head of Promotions at Cats Protection, agrees. "We know that cats 'add life' by having a positive effect on their owners' health and well-being, partly because pets help people to socialise," she explained. "For example, chatting to others about cats' eating preferences by the pet food shelves in the local supermarket can offer cat owners of all ages meaningful social contact."

Another recent study by Dr McNicholas and Dr Glynn Collis has revealed that cat-owners also appear to enjoy better psychological health than other pet owners. In a study of 52 dog owners, 44 cat owners and 43 non-pet owners, stress symptoms were highest in the non-pet owners, second lowest in the dog owners and lowest in the cat owners (*Collis, G.M., McNicholas, J. & Harker, R.M. Could enhanced social networks explain the association between pet ownership and health? (In press). British Journal of Health Psychology*). As it's not only happy, healthy people who own cats, it is the close relationships that people have with their felines (and other humans through their cats) that offers them physical and psychological benefits.

Ann Widdecombe MP is one person in the public eye who clearly benefits from a great relationship with her cats, Pugwash and Carruthers. "At the end of a long, hard day, there is nothing like the relaxing, understanding company of something furry and purry," she said.

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Cats can particularly 'add life' for older people. A Gallup poll conducted last year found that 68% of pet owners aged 65 or over felt their pet was their 'best friend'. A cat can provide an important sense of routine, helping their elderly owners to keep going, particularly in the face of bereavement or a major upheaval. A study examining the role of pets for older people adjusting to spousal bereavement found that pet owners reported fewer physical symptoms than non-pet owners for up to six months after bereavement (*The role of pets adjusting to spousal bereavement. McNicholas, J.*).

Young people can also gain considerable social and personal support from a pet. Another recent study (*McNicholas, J. & Collis, G.M. (2001). Children's representation of pets in their social networks. Child Care, Health and Development, Vol 27, no. 3, 279 - 294*) found that children considered their cat just as important as their mother as a source of comfort in times of stress and illness. Pets featured prominently in the findings, providing comfort and acting as a confidant in certain situations. "A supportive relationship with a cat or other pet can also have the added benefit of allowing children to establish positive relationships with other people," said Dr McNicholas.

Coincidentally, the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Human-Animal Interactions will be held in Rio de Janeiro during Cats Protection Week i.e. from September 13 – 15. The theme of the ninth edition is "People and Animals: a Global Perspective for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century."

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**For more information on the Rio Conference**, please visit [www.iahaio.org](http://www.iahaio.org)

***Note to editors: Spokespeople available for interview:***

Mrs Judy Bernstein, Head of Promotions at Cats Protection.

Dr June McNicholas, Lecturer in Health Psychology in the Department of Psychology and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Warwick.