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Surprising ways pets benefit your kids

By LISA A. BEACH

It's 6am and you hear your baby whimpering. He's probably hungry, but you just want to sleep a little longer. Nevertheless, like any good parent, you get out of bed to feed him.

But you're not feeding your infant son. You're feeding Rocky, your beloved golden retriever who is such an integral part of your family that you're willing to get up at the crack of dawn for him.

Why do you care so much? And what does this special bond mean to your family?

As you incorporate a pet into your family's daily rhythm, he quickly wiggles his way into your hearts. He flashes his "I'll-miss-you" puppy dog eyes whenever you leave the house and greets you at the door when you come home. He wags his tail and curls up next to your kids, giving them a built-in snuggle buddy. In turn, your family celebrates his birthday, takes selfies with him, plays with him and takes him on vacation. It's a two-way love-fest.

"When I'm watching TV, Shadow sits on my chest and rubs his head against me," explains Kevin, the "parent" of a 25 lb. cat. "He's so heavy that it's a little hard to breathe. Even

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though I'm gasping for air after a few minutes, I love his affection."

According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, growing up with a pet can usher in a host of benefits.

Children with pets learn how to be responsible and they learn big-picture lessons – especially about the circle of life, from birth and illnesses to accidents and death.

Kids often confide in their pets, treating them like a trusted confidant – and the pets listen with no judgment, which helps kids share their feelings. Pets also cuddle and provide comfort, which helps kids develop compassion and non-verbal communication skills.

"One of the most amazing things our pets teach us is empathy," says Dr. Alexandra Barrientos of Earth Angels Veterinary Hospital. "We see ourselves in them and I think that opens humans up to see things from a different point of view."

This might just make up for all those mornings when you sacrifice extra shut-eye to get up and feed your "baby."

Lisa A. Beach is a freelance writer, humorist and recovering homeschooled mom. Find more at www.LisaBeachWrites.com.

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