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## **New Research Shows Cats Help Children with Autism**

***Human Animal Bond Research Institute Lauds First-of-its-kind Scientific Study on Shelter Cats and Improved Social Skills for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder***

**WASHINGTON, DC (December 9, 2020)** – The Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) today announced the results of a new study published in the *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* titled, “Exploratory study of cat adoption in families of children with autism: Impact on children’s social skills and anxiety,” demonstrating that children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may experience increases in empathy and decreases in problem behaviors after adoption of a shelter cat into their families.

“Our study found that children with ASD experienced significant increases in the social skill of empathy, significant decreases in problem behaviors including bullying and hyperactivity/inattention, and also less separation anxiety after the introduction of a shelter cat,” said Gretchen Carlisle, PhD, MEd, RN, research scientist at the University of Missouri Research Center for Human Animal Interaction (ReCHAI). “Previous research has focused on interactions of dogs with children who have ASD, but dogs may not provide the best fit for all children and their families, especially given the hypersensitivities to sound that are common among children with ASD,” Carlisle said. “We hope the results of this study will help encourage more families to consider the possibility of cat ownership and help more shelter cats find loving, deserving homes.”

“For the first time, we have scientific research that shows how beneficial cats can be for families of children with ASD,” said Steven Feldman, President of HABRI, the primary funder of the study. “Selecting a suitable family pet is an important decision. Families with a child with ASD now have more information and more choices, and we hope that this will also help more shelter cats find good homes.”

Findings of the *Feline Friends* study, led by researchers at the University of Missouri, demonstrated that children with an adopted shelter cat had better empathy and less separation anxiety, as well as fewer problem behaviors exhibited by less externalizing, bullying and hyperactivity/inattention. Children and parents also felt strong bonds with their new cat almost immediately after adoption and despite the responsibilities involved in care for a cat, these bonds did not decrease over time. The researchers conclude that shelter cats may be beneficial for some children with ASD while not necessarily creating a burden for their parents.

Participating families of children were randomized into two groups. Families in one group adopted a shelter cat immediately and were followed for 18 weeks. Other families were in a control group for 18 weeks with no cat and then adopted a shelter cat and were followed for an additional 18 weeks. Surveys were collected every six weeks measuring children's social skills and anxiety and parent/child bonds with their cat. Shelter cats available for adoption in the study were all required to pass the Feline Temperament Profile with a score of greater than or equal to 20 identifying them as having a calm temperament.

“In the families of children with ASD who adopted temperament-screened shelter cats in this study, parents and children bonded with their new cats. To our knowledge, no studies prior to this have examined the attachment to the cats of children with ASD and their caregivers after adoption. We hope other scientists will further study cat adoption in families of children with ASD, following this important exploratory study,” said Dr. Vicki Thayer, Interim Executive Director of the Winn Feline Foundation.

The *Feline Friends Study* was funded by HABRI and the [Winn Feline Foundation](#). Read the full paper in the *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*:  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pedn.2020.11.011>

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### **About ReCHAI**

ReCHAI, founded in 2005, operates as a dynamic collaboration between the University of Missouri Sinclair School of Nursing and College of Veterinary Medicine with a mission of education and conducting programs and studies about the benefits of human-animal interaction.

### **About HABRI**

HABRI is a not-for-profit organization that maintains the world's largest online library of human-animal bond research and information; funds innovative research projects to scientifically document the health benefits of companion animals; and informs the public about human-animal bond research and the beneficial role of companion animals in society. For more information, please visit <http://www.habri.org>.

### **About Winn Feline Foundation**

Winn Feline Foundation is a nonprofit organization established in 1968 that supports studies to improve cat health. Since 1968, the Winn Feline Foundation has funded more than \$7.6 million in health research for cats at more than 30 partner institutions worldwide. For further information, go to [www.winnfelinefoundation.org](http://www.winnfelinefoundation.org).

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