

# It's puppy love

Four-legged friends can keep us healthy and happy.

**Caroline Roberts** talks to the charities that are bringing people and pups together



**D**ogs are definitely Brits' best friends. A recent poll found that a pooch is the preferred pet for almost half of us. A dog is a loyal companion, and taking one for a walk is a great way to get some exercise and make social connections. Dogs can boost health in other ways too – stroking a pet has been shown to reduce blood pressure and lessen anxiety and stress. But it's not easy for everyone to enjoy the benefits, as dog ownership comes with a lot of responsibility, and the cost of food, vet bills and kennels can soon mount up. However, several organisations are finding ways to bring puppy love to all.

## BORROW MY DOGGY

Rikke Rosenlund had spent a fun-filled day taking care of a friend's dog when she had a light-bulb moment. 'I suddenly thought: why are people leaving their dogs home alone, or spending so much on day care or dog walkers, when there are people like me who'd love to look after a dog for free?' She soon set up Borrow My Doggy ([www.borrowmydoggy.com](http://www.borrowmydoggy.com)), a website to connect owners with carers, and had 85 people sign up in the first three days. 'There was an elderly man in Cornwall who'd just had an operation and needed help walking his dogs; young professionals and students in cities who were missing their family dogs back home; and a family with a little girl who was begging for a dog. When I read that, I started crying because, as a child, I'd always wanted a dog, but we couldn't have one. So it was a very personal mission to get kids some happy dog time,' smiles the Londoner.

That was in 2012 and now Borrow My Doggy has over 600,000 members across the UK and Ireland. One of those is Angela Newey from Redditch, mum to five-year-old Alexa, who was having problems settling



Photo 4: Rob Worrall

1. Louise Russell with a four-legged friend 2. Rikke Rosenlund and a canine companion 3. Harry and Vader 4. Molly, Alexa and Angela with Beau the chug 5. Moira Clark and Leo 6. Jean Duffy and Chloe 7. Tracey Berridge and Vader

into school. Angela felt a doggy friend would help Alexa, but ownership was out of the question as both parents work full time. Through Borrow My Doggy, they found Beau the chug – a chihuahua and pug cross – who lives just half a mile away and whose owner, Helen, was struggling to find time to walk him.

Twice a week, Alexa looks forward to taking Beau for walks around a local lake after school. 'She holds the lead, which gives her a sense of responsibility and builds her confidence,' says Angela. And she's made a human friend too, as Helen's eight-year-old daughter, Molly, often joins them. 'It's cute to see them interacting, with Molly pointing out birds and flowers to Alexa. It gets her out in the fresh air and gives our walks a focus, rather than just saying "Let's go to the park". If it's a choice between watching TV and taking Beau out, Alexa will definitely choose the walk.'

## DOGS HELPING KIDS

For Tracey Berridge, the flash of inspiration came when she was a teenager in the mid-1980s. 'I saw a film about Skeezer, America's first ever therapy dog, and it had a big impact.' The idea for her charity, the Barnstaple-based Dogs Helping Kids (DHK, [www.dogshelpingkids.co.uk](http://www.dogshelpingkids.co.uk)), was formed, but it was a long time in the

planning. First, she set about training as a dog behaviourist, eventually gaining a master's degree in canine behaviour. 'I wanted to be an expert so I could run the charity properly,' she explains.

DHK launched in 2002 and around 50 schools across the country are now benefiting. Taking dogs into schools has been shown to motivate children to better academic achievement, develop their sense of responsibility, social skills and empathy, and cut down on absences. It takes three years to train a DHK school dog, and it has to pass eight increasingly difficult assessments before becoming either an Educational Assistance Dog, which attends school most days and is usually owned by a staff member, or a Support School Dog, which works on a one-to-one basis with teenagers experiencing a range of difficulties.

One such teenager is 13-year-old Harry, who has autism and has found a best friend in Tracey's own dog, Vader. 'He's a calm and sweet dog, and is very in tune with emotions,' says Tracey. 'He knows straight away if someone's having a bad day.'

Harry and Vader have been working together for a year now, and have a great bond. For Harry's mum, Heather, it's been the key that's helped unlock his world. When she came across the charity, Harry

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was struggling with overwhelming anxiety and was unable to attend school. 'He was socially isolated and losing confidence fast,' says Heather. 'It's lovely to see how happy and relaxed he is when he's working with Vader. He's even started to contemplate what qualifications he needs to study animal behaviour at university.'

## GIVE A DOG A BONE

Another charity, Give a Dog a Bone ([www.giveadogabone.net](http://www.giveadogabone.net)), provides financial support to people over 60 who might not otherwise be able to afford to keep their dog. It also helps with the process and cost if they would like to rehome a pet from a rescue centre. 'We're trying to tackle two of society's problems: loneliness for older people and homelessness for animals,' says Louise Russell, who founded the charity in 2013. Although based in Glasgow, people from anywhere in the country can apply for support.

Give a Dog a Bone helps Moira Clark, 77, from Paisley, with the cost of insurance and routine healthcare for her Yorkie, Leo. 'I doubt I'd have been able to keep a dog if not for the charity and, if I didn't have him, I'd never get out for a walk three times a day,' she says. 'I've met people I'd never have met otherwise too. Leo's great company and is like my baby. I talk to him constantly.'

And it's not just people who are reaping the benefits. When Glasgow-dweller Jean Duffy, 73, received photos of homeless dogs from the charity, she knew what she had to do. 'I spotted this frightened wee dog peeking out from among all the others and immediately fell in love. Chloe had come from Romania, where she was found in a cage beside a dead dog. She was extremely traumatised and it took a lot of time and TLC before I was able to gain her trust. She's now such a happy dog, and has repaid me a thousand times with her love, devotion, loyalty and companionship. I can't imagine life without her.'