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Teen happier with a dog

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IT seems that parents fretting about a surly or withdrawn or plain obnoxious teenager could do worse than keep a dog around the house.



That's because doing so "has beneficial effects, especially for adolescents, and these effects may be mediated through symbiosis with microorganisms," said Takefumi Kikusui of Azabu University in Japan.

Teens who spend time with dogs tend to be more sociable and have better mental health than others – and the reason is in part down to apparent changes to the range of microbes in and on the adolescents brought about by having a hound around.

"A family dog can change the microbiome in ways that support mental health, empathy and prosocial behaviour," the researchers said.

And while previous work, including by Kikusui, has found dog owners to generally report better well-being than others, the mechanisms behind such differences remain unclear.

Kikusui said that his past efforts had found that teens in dog-keeping households had different saliva microbiota compared to peers who did not have a dog at home.

And while still more work on the subject is needed, the latest findings – published in the journal iscience last December – suggest a human-dog symbiosis that is likely down to "thousands of years of human-canine coexistence."

"The most interesting finding from this study is that bacteria promoting prosociality, or empathy, were discovered in the microbiomes of adolescent children who keep dogs," Kikusui said, after running supplementary tests to see how the same bacteria affected mice as well as teenagers. – dpa