

BEST FRIENDS FOREVER

PET SPECIAL



Scared of snakes?! Millie from Staffordshire was... until she met Kyuss the corn snake!

If you're feeling stressed or just want to chillax, what do you do? Head outside for a walk in the woods, wallop a football against a wall or phone up a friend for a natter? Or, like lots of animal lovers, do you simply **spend time with your pet**? Many people enjoy the special moment when a cat strolls over, purrs and rubs its head against their legs. Others love the **loyal companionship** of a dog. Some prefer something a little more exotic – like a feathered, slimy or scaly chum. The one thing that all pet owners agree on is that our favourite animals can have an amazingly **calming effect** on us.

“Scientists have found that positive animal experiences help release naturally occurring **feel-good hormones** in our bodies,” explains animal expert **Dr Daniel Allen**, author of a book called *The Nature Magpie*. “They can lower our blood pressure, stress and anxiety levels, and help increase our confidence. Animal encounters can **trigger memories**, and **stimulate people** who may be shy or find it difficult to communicate. There’s no doubt that animals can **lift our mood**, **improve our health** and **make us happy**.”

Now, meet some creatures that have that **feel-good factor**...



I wuff you!

Haatchi loves his buddy, Owen!

Haatchi Basingstoke, Hampshire

Nine-year-old **Owen Howkins**, known as Little B to his family, has a rare medical condition called **Schwartz-Jampel syndrome**, which causes muscles in his body to be permanently tensed. His pet pal is a three-legged **Anatolian shepherd dog** called **Haatchi**, who was adopted as a puppy by Owen's dad Will. Haatchi had been abandoned on a railway line and hit by a train. Despite losing a leg and his tail, the giant puppy somehow crawled to safety, and Owen and Haatchi soon became the best of buddies.

“I think they bonded because they both had similar issues with walking,” says Will. “Owen could see that Haatchi had a missing leg, but I believe Haatchi sensed something before he went into Owen's bedroom for the first time. He's a really big dog but he was very careful where he went and he was gentle. And I think that helped Owen trust him. Haatchi is loveable, amazing and strong.”

Owen has become more confident and outgoing since meeting Haatchi. “He used to hate going out in his wheelchair because people would stare,” says Will. “But now he has no issues going out in public.”

Girl with snake: David Macleaman.

Stoosh, Skittles, Connie & Kyuss Lichfield, Staffordshire

It's not just dogs or cats that make us feel better. “All animals can be therapeutic,” says **Dale Preece-Kelly**, from **Critterish Allsorts**, who, among other roles, provides animal-assisted therapy sessions for patients with mental health issues.

Two of Dale's favourite therapy animals are his **skunks**, **Stoosh** and **Skittles**. “It's their attitude and personality that makes them special,” he says. “If you put a cat on a person's lap, nine times out of ten it will jump off and go back to its own bed. But Stoosh and Skittles enjoy long firm strokes and will settle, happily lying on somebody's lap, snoozing. This helps the person feel relaxed, because they feel the animal likes them – it makes the person feel good about themselves.”

Dale takes his pet boa constrictor **Connie** and corn snake **Kyuss** (far left) to schools and therapy sessions, too. “One person told me that Connie ‘hugs’ him and that the snake's movement is slow, gentle and calming,” he says. “Kyuss helped a girl called Millie who was afraid of snakes. It's quite amazing.”



Don't worry, I don't stink, really!

The therapy skunks visit hospitals, schools and homes!



Vikki's patients love spending time with Sherman

Tickle, tickle!

Sherman, Snowy and Taboo Seaham, County Durham

Vikki Goodings, from **Scales 'n' Tails Animal Encounters**, has a host of unusual animals in her marvellous menagerie. As well as visiting schools to give children an animal experience, Vikki takes **Sherman the tortoise**, **Snowy the giant African land snail** and **Taboo the tarantula** into care homes to provide a pet therapy service. She visits elderly people with dementia, a medical condition that causes problems with thinking or memory.

“Sherman is very popular,” says Vikki. “A lot of older people had tortoises when they were younger and Sherman inspires them to tell stories about their own tortoises.” Her pet tarantulas are also a *wild success*. “Taboo feels so light and furry when she's tip-tapping across your hand,” Vikki explains. “She's slow and calming. And the snails are amazing as their little faces have character and their mouths look like moustaches. They're unusual. People love them!”

Not everyone will enjoy holding a slimy snail or being slithered on by a snake. But animals of all shapes and sizes do have the remarkable ability to make us relax, feel calm and increase our confidence. So the next time your furry friend comes over for a fuss, think about how it makes YOU feel.



Even Vikki's giant snails have helped people!



WIN!

Book bonanza! Haatchi and Owen Howkins' amazing friendship has been turned into a book by author Wendy Holden. Five lucky readers will win a copy of *Haatchi & Little B*, along with Daniel Allen's *Nature Magpie* book AND National Geographic Kids' *How To Speak Cat!* To be in with a chance of winning, just answer this simple question... Enter on page 47. Good luck!

Q Which of these is NOT a breed of dog?
 a) Anatolian shepherd
 b) Border collie
 c) Russian blue