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## **Summit Explores PAWSitive Impact of Animals on the Health and Development of Children**

**ATLANTA, April 13, 2004** — Prominent human and animal health experts will bring to light the important role of animals in the lives of children at an upcoming Summit—THINK PAWSITIVE! 2004—underscoring scientific studies that show early interaction with animals can enhance a child's physical and psychological development.

Sponsored by PAWSitive InterAction, a non-profit alliance of animal-loving organizations in Atlanta, the Summit will feature presentations from medical and psychological authorities and highlight compelling research about how interacting with animals can enhance children's health and development. Hosted at Emory University in conjunction with the Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Pediatrics and the Emory Children's Center, the Summit will be held at 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday, April 21<sup>st</sup>, at the Woodruff Health Sciences Center Plaza.

"Studies show that animals can do more than boost emotions—they can boost immunity to childhood allergies," said Dr. Dennis Ownby, Professor of Pediatrics and Medicine and Head of the Section of Allergy and Immunology at the Medical College of Georgia.

As one of two renowned researchers who will be featured at the Summit, Dr. Ownby led a study that showed children born into households with two or more dogs or cats had about 50 percent less chance of developing allergies. "Contrary to conventional opinion, early exposure to dogs and cats does not increase the risk of becoming allergic to them," said Dr. Ownby. "In fact, it decreases the risk of becoming allergic to anything."

At the Summit, Dr. Ownby will expand on the findings from the Childhood Allergy Study and offer a fascinating glimpse into new findings—including groundbreaking insights that suggest a mother's exposure to pets can be linked to a child's increased immunity prior to birth.

The Summit also will feature Dr. Gail Melson, Professor of Child Development and Family Studies at Purdue University and author of *Why the Wild Things Are: Animals in the Lives of Children* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2001). As a pioneer in researching animals and children, Dr. Melson has long studied the role animals play in a child's developing sense of self. At the summit, Dr. Melson will explore the complex roles that animals can play in the psychological lives of children.

"Most studies of pets in children's lives have focused on social and emotional aspects, however, there are intriguing indications that animals also play a role in perceptual, cognitive and language development," said Dr. Melson. "This can set a research agenda for a new view of children's development, one that recognizes the importance of animals and all the living world."

Pets are a part of daily life in 62 percent of American households, with more pets than people in the U.S., according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. However, early studies on the human-animal bond began as recently as the late 1970s, and it was not until about 15 years ago that social scientists discovered that animals were an important part of people's lives.

"We're just beginning to understand the wonderful and magical ways that all types of animals enrich our lives and enhance our physical well-being." said Sharon Gruber, President of PAWSitive InterAction. "The founding members of PAWSitive InterAction encourage researchers to support further studies needed to fully explore the benefits of animals at all stages and ages of life."

PAWSitive InterAction promotes and celebrates the human-animal bond. Each member organization fosters opportunities for people to experience the human-animal bond. Founding members include Zoo Atlanta, Pets Are Loving Support (PALS), Happy Tails Pet Therapy, Atlanta Humane Society, and Merial, a leading animal health company. The principal activities of PAWSitive InterAction are an annual educational THINK PAWSitive! Summit on the health benefits of interacting with animals, and a white paper summarizing the scientific research presented. For more information, visit [www.PAWSitiveInterAction.org](http://www.PAWSitiveInterAction.org).

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