Purina Awards $120,000 in Global Research Grants to Advance Understanding of the Human-Pet Bond

2026 Purina Sponsorship for Human-Animal Bond Studies Program to fund three new studies exploring how pets support survivor healing, child well-being and feline mental health

ST. LOUIS, Dec. 17, 2025 /PRNewswire/ -- Today, Purina – a global leader in pet care – announced it has awarded research grants to three distinguished scientific teams from the United States and Hungary as part of its biennial Purina Sponsorship for Human-Animal Bond Studies program. Each project will receive up to $40,000 to advance understanding of the bond between pets and people, and how it can impact the well-being of both.

The 2026 Purina Sponsorship for Human-Animal Bond Studies program cohort reflects Purina's commitment to fostering collaboration and generating insights that have far-reaching impact – from survivor support services in the U.S., to remote therapy models with the potential to reach children worldwide, to the first-ever observational study of cat separation behaviors drawing data from pet owners across the globe.

"Science is most impactful when it is shared, and we are committed not only to advancing the study of the human-pet bond through our in-house research, but also by supporting investigators around the world who share our passion for improving the lives of pets and the people who love them," said Dr. Annie Valuska, Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist and Principal Scientist on the Pet Behavior Team at Purina. "These studies stand to deepen our understanding of the human-pet bond in some of life's most challenging moments. What these researchers discover could lead to more compassionate interventions, stronger behavioral and emotional support for pets, and improved resources for the people who depend on them every day."

Purina reviewed more than 100 research proposals to select the 2026 research grant recipients. This year, preference was given to studies exploring how the bond supports people in vulnerable situations, how human-animal interactions influence the wellbeing of pets themselves, and how to deepen knowledge of the unique connection between people and cats.

The 2026 Purina Sponsorship for Human-Animal Bond Studies research grant recipients are:

- **Understanding the Human-Animal Bond in IPV-Affected Households: Impacts on Survivor Healing, Pet Welfare and Service Provision**
  Principal Investigator: Jennifer A. Wagman, PhD, MHS, at the Jonathan and Karin Fielding School of Public Health at the University of California, Los Angeles in Los Angeles, California
  This 18-month mixed-methods study will examine how the human-animal bond contributes to psychological resilience and healing among survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV), while also assessing impacts on companion animal welfare. Integrating survivor interviews, key informant insights and human-animal bond questions into a statewide survey reaching approximately 1,000 Californians who have experienced IPV, this U.S.-based research has significant implications for global public health, where similar barriers to pet-inclusive sheltering exist. Findings will inform trauma-responsive, pet-inclusive care practices and be shared through publications, training materials and community-oriented webinars in collaboration with nonprofit RedRover.

- **In Your Absence: Investigating Separation-Related Disorders in Companion Cats**
  Principal Investigator: Paula Pérez Fraga, PhD, Eötvös Loránd University Institute of Biology in Budapest, Hungary.
  Led by one of Europe's leading animal behavior research groups, this project will conduct the first large-scale, direct observational study of cat separation-related disorders (SRDs) using a global citizen-science model. By gathering video submissions and survey data from cat owners worldwide, the study will examine risk factors – including feline personality and owner interaction styles – and produce the first high-resolution ethogram of feline separation behavior. These insights will

support international veterinary professionals, behaviorists and cat owners in identifying and addressing SRDs and strengthening the human-cat bond.

- **Designing an Inclusive Model: Remote Canine-Assisted Therapy for Underserved Pediatric Oncology Patients**
  Principal Investigator: Judit Abdai, PhD, at the Hungarian Ethology Foundation at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary
  This study will evaluate a Remote Canine-Assisted Therapy (RCAT) model enabling safe, real-time interaction with trained dogs for pediatric oncology patients who cannot participate in in-person therapy due to immunosuppression or infection risk. Using a counterbalanced crossover design, researchers will measure psychosocial outcomes such as motivation, mood and anxiety. The remote model has global scalability, offering a pathway to expand therapy access to children in rural regions, underserved communities and countries without an established therapy dog infrastructure, while also protecting therapy dog welfare.

"Receiving this research grant from Purina is an honor for our team," said Dr. Jennifer A. Wagman, 2026 Purina Sponsorship for Human-Animal Bond Studies grant recipient and Associate Professor at UCLA Fielding School of Public Health. "The grant will provide crucial support to study how pets can help survivors of intimate partner violence heal, while also ensuring that the animals themselves are safe and supported. We are excited for the ways this work can make a real difference in people's lives."

Since its launch in 2016, the Purina Sponsorship for Human-Animal Bond Studies program has awarded $1.2 million to support a diverse range of international studies exploring how the human-animal bond influences both people and pets. Previous grant recipients have examined the genetics behind canine "hyper-sociability" and its potential to improve adoption matches in shelters; investigated how solicited versus forced touch affects the wellbeing of both dogs and humans to strengthen standards for Animal Assisted Interactions; explored how attachment to pets may help protect women with histories of childhood abuse from psychological and social disorders; and evaluated whether therapy dog programs can support student mental health without compromising the welfare of the animals involved.

Purina and its team of nearly 500 pet experts, including nutritionists, behaviorists and veterinarians, invest more than $100 million annually in research to help pets live longer, healthier lives. This commitment continues to drive advancements in nutrition, behavior science and human-animal bond understanding on a global scale.

About Nestlé Purina PetCare

Nestlé Purina PetCare creates richer lives for pets and the people who love them. Founded in 1894, Purina has helped dogs and cats live longer, healthier lives by offering scientifically based nutritional innovations.

Purina manufactures some of the world's most trusted and popular pet care products, including Dog Chow, Purina ONE, Pro Plan, Friskies and Tidy Cats. Our more than 11,000 U.S. associates take pride in our trusted pet food, treat and litter brands that feed 46 million dogs and 68 million cats every year. Nearly 500 Purina scientists, veterinarians, and pet care experts ensure our commitment to unsurpassed quality and nutrition.

Over the past five years, Purina has contributed more than $150 million towards organizations that bring, and keep, people and pets together, as well as those that help our communities and environment thrive.

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