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Original Report



'Spot' Goes High-Tech

Researchers Try Robotic Pets as Companions for the Elderly

By Jackie Judd
abc NEWS.com

April 9 — Pets have long been hailed for their ability to help older people deal the loneliness and isolation that comes with aging in America. But what about pets made out of plastic and metal?

Researchers in Indiana are testing robotic dogs as companions for the elderly. (ABCNEWS.com)

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Researchers in Indiana are trying to find out if robots — which no one has to feed or walk — can do the same job as flesh and blood animals.

Rosewalk Common is an assisted living community in Lafayette, Ind. run by American Senior Communities. Rose Lawson, 90, has lived at Rosewalk for four years and recently joined other residents to meet "Aibo" (pronounced "I-bo"), a frisky, silver and black robotic dog made by Sony.

Aibo made its way around a circle of seated residents, playing fetch, responding to spoken commands, sitting in laps to be petted — and winning friends.

"Do you like me? Do you like me," Lawson asked Aibo. The robot responded with an electronic "Ohhh," winning a big smile from Lawson.

The noise is one of a number of sounds Aibo uses to convey "feelings." A programmed vocabulary of 75 words lets the robot respond to simple spoken commands. Aibo also uses flashing lights in its "face" to indicate expressions.

"He's really got a personality," said Lawson, as another robotic dog joined Aibo.

Fellow resident Joe McGriff, an 82-year-old Air Force veteran, was a little bit tougher to sell. "They're real cute, but a little bark would make them more like a dog than a sound," he said.

Can Robots Make People Happier?

The robotic dogs were brought to Rosewalk by researchers at Indiana's Purdue University as part of a pilot project to determine whether robots can make people happier.

Alan M. Beck, a professor at Purdue and director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at the university's veterinary school, said one possible benefit may be better socialization.

"We find people who in nursing home settings might be socially isolated and don't routinely chat with each other have something to talk about together, to have fun, to have reminiscences," said Beck.

Before Aibo could work his magic, the Rosewalk residents had to make the mental leap to treat the robot like a real dog. That didn't seem to take long.

When Aibo first was brought into Rosewalk, the residents seemed skeptical and resistant. But in a few minutes, Aibo was being talked to and touched as if it were real.

"What are you trying to tell me?" asked Lawson as she patted the robot's head.

"Oh, he wants to cuddle," said a companion, reaching to hold Aibo in her lap.



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"There's no self-consciousness," said Beck. "There's a kind of suspension of disbelief."

Programmed to Generate Human Feelings

Robotic dogs are programmed to respond to commands, to wag their tails if told they are "good." All of this is supposed to lull humans into feeling even more attached — to a robot.

Ronald Arkin, director of the Robot Mobile Laboratory at the Georgia Institute of Technology and one of Aibo's designers, explained the how those feelings of attachment get triggered.

"The key in bonding with these kinds of systems, it's important to exhibit novelty over the long term," he said. "And so we allow them to change their behavior, not just immediately, but over a period of weeks, months and potentially years."

Rosewalk resident Joe McGriff emphasized the need for change. "It's like an electronic game to me. They're fun but get old real fast."

The very concept of robots that seduce people into thinking they are real is just too much for sociologist Sherry Turkle, director of the Initiative on Technology and Self at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"I think we should take it as a wake-up call and really say, 'Now, why are we giving robot pets to old people?' And the answer, I think, is that we really have been struggling to figure out how to give enough people to old people."

Assistant professor Nancy Edwards, of the Purdue School of Nursing, acknowledges the preference of human contact. But she still sees value in the Aibo study. "We know human interaction is best, we know human-animal [interaction] is probably second, but if these people are having no interaction, what we're saying is, will some interaction with a robot help in some way?"

"You can see smiling, laughing, remembering of good things, and talking among each other," said Beck. "This is more than just diversion, this is kind of a therapeutic event, where people really, I think, benefited from the experience." ■

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