



Children and their pets: Exploring the relationships between pet ownership, attitudes, attachment and empathy

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INTRODUCTION

Animals, often described as family members and friends, play a significant role in children's lives (Melson, 2001). Pet ownership is associated with a range of socio-emotional, health-related and cognitive benefits, although much of the existing research has been conducted in the US with adults or adolescents (Muldoon et al., 2009). In the UK, many children grow up in pet-owning homes and their involvement with pets potentially results in reciprocal benefits for child development and animal welfare. This study explores the relationships between pet ownership, attitudes towards and attachment to pets and children's empathy with others. Previous research suggests that direct experience with pets leads to enhanced positive attitudes towards animals and greater empathy that may also transfer to humans. The project is funded by Defra¹ and aims to develop a UK evidence base on the importance of child-animal interactions for both child development and animal welfare.

SAMPLE

121 children from a rural community participated in a survey administered within school:

57 x 9-year-olds (29 girls; 28 boys)

38 x 11-year-olds (21 girls; 17 boys)

26 x 13-year-olds (12 girls; 14 boys)

SURVEY QUESTIONS & SCALES

Five questions on pet ownership were developed for the study (including number of pets currently owned, type of pet, personal pet, past ownership).

¹ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Four existing scales were employed to assess attitudes, attachment and empathy:

- 8-item *Pet Attitude Scale-Modified* (Templer et al., 1981; Munsell et al., 2004),
- 12-item *Attachment to Pets Scale* (APS) (Staats et al., 1996),
- 10-item 'general attachment' sub-scale of the *Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale* (LAPS) (Johnson et al., 1992), and
- 'Affective Empathy' sub-scale of the *Empathy Questionnaire* (Enz et al., in prep).

RESULTS

Table 1: Pet ownership

Age	Girls	Boys	Total	Mean age (range)
9-10	22 (75.9%)	22 (78.6%)	44 (77.2%)	10yrs,1mth (9y,6m; 10y,8m)
11-12	18 (85.7%)	13 (76.5%)	31 (81.6%)	12yrs,2mths (11y,6m; 12y, 10m)
13-14	10 (83.3%)	11 (78.6%)	21 (80.8%)	13yrs, 11mths (13y, 5m; 14y, 5m)
Total	50 (80.6%)	46 (78.0%)	96 (79.3%)	11yrs, 6mths (9y, 6m; 14y, 5m)

Table 2: Personal pet ownership

Age	Girls	Boys	Total	Mean age (range)
9-10	15 (51.7%)	18 (66.7%)	33 (58.9%)	10yrs,1mth (9y,6m; 10y,8m)
11-12	11 (55%)	7 (41.2%)	18 (48.6%)	12yrs,2mths (11y,6m; 12y, 10m)
13-14	7 (58.3%)	8 (66.7%)	15 (62.5%)	13yrs, 11mths (13y, 5m; 14y, 5m)
Total	33 (54.1%)	33 (58.9%)	66 (56.4%)	11yrs, 6mths (9y, 6m; 14y, 5m)

χ^2 for gender differences not significant at $p < .05$

Group differences:

- No significant developmental changes found for the four measures (but signs that younger age group may hold more favourable views)

- Decrease in animal-directed empathy with age (single item) (age 9=88%, age 13=56%, $\chi^2(2, n=120)=10.23, p < .01$)
- Gender differences in empathy (m =girls 4.03; boys 3.53, $t(118)=3.85, p < .01$); girls higher on animal-directed empathy item (84% girls; 67% boys, $\chi^2(1, n=120)=4.52, p < .05$)
- Near significant difference in attitudes of those who feel they have a pet of their own compared with those who do not (m =own pet 4.43, no pet of own 4.24, $t(115)=1.92, p = .058$)

Correlations between scales:

- Attitudes and Attachment (APS): .75, $p < .01$
- Attitudes and Attachment (LAPS): .75, $p < .01$
- Attitudes and Empathy: .29, $p < .01$
- Attachment (APS) and Empathy: .30, $p < .01$
- Attachment (LAPS) and Empathy: .28, $p < .01$

CONCLUSIONS

- **The majority of UK children live with pets; over 50% report having a pet of their own**
- **Pet attitudes and attachments are highly related**
- **Few developmental changes are evident**
- **Higher levels of empathy among girls**
- **Personal connection with a pet more important in terms of attitudes, than pet ownership per se**
- **There is a need for large-scale research on the impact of pets on child development**

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