Investigating the impact of childhood pets on children's social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing

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Theoretical background

- Social relationships are fundamental to child development; studies have focussed on children's relationships with other humans

- The family environment and parenting are well understood as critical for the promotion of child development and adjustment

- However, to date, little research has focused on the impact of having a childhood pet on child social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing

Theoretical background

- Systematic review* found evidence for an association between pet ownership and
  - emotional health benefits (self-esteem, loneliness)
  - educational and cognitive benefits (perspective-taking abilities, intellectual development)
  - social development (social competence; social interaction, social play behaviour)

- Inconclusive findings regarding anxiety, depression and behavioural development

*Purewal R, Christley R, Kordas K, Joinson C, Meints K, Gee N, et al. Companion Animals and Child/Adolescent Development: A Systematic Review of the Evidence. Int J

Theoretical background

- Strong attachment to pets associated with better quality of life and mental wellbeing

- Owning a pet not as influential as being attached to a pet

- Relationship maintained across SES

- Attachment to pets weakens with age

- Girls report stronger attachment than boys

- Relationships with dogs more strongly associated with wellbeing

Research Questions

- Is there a relationship between childhood pets (dogs/cats) and children's social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing, specifically positive development and oppositional defiant behaviour?

- Does the way parents relate to the household pet matter in regard to the child's development?

Cross-sectional Survey (N=233)

- Australia-wide, online survey of parents
- Eligibility:
    - Have a pet dog or cat
    - Have a child between 7-12 years of age
- Recruited mostly through social media (58%), media (12%), schools (9%)

Sample Characteristics

5%   95%
Mean age 42 (26-59)

- 67% original, two-parent family
- 21% sole parent

'target' child 9.5 years old, 52% girls

- 34% High School, TAFE/ Apprenticeship
- 66% University educated

- 37% working full-time
- 44% part-time
- 19% not working

5% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin

68% answered about their dog

Measures

Name	Construct	Subscales	Scoring
Adolescent Functioning Scale (AFS; Dittman, Burke, Filus, Haslam, & Ralph, 2016)	Child's adaptive functioning	• Oppositional Defiant Behaviour • Positive Development	High scores- Greater ODB and PD
Children's Treatment of Animals Questionnaire (CTAQ; Thompson & Gullone, 2003)	Child's treatment of their own CA	Total Score	High scores- positive treatment
Short Attachment to Pets Scale (SAPS; Marsa-Sambola et al., 2016)	Child's attachment to their CA	Total Score	Low scores- high attachment

Measures

Name	Construct		Scoring
Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (LAPS; Johnson, Garrity, & Stallones, 1992)	Parent attachment to the CA	Total Score	Low scores – high attachment
Pet Parenting Practices (Burke 2019)	Parents' treatment of CA	• Positive Pet Parenting • Ineffective Pet Parenting	High scores- more positive/ aversive strategies

Correlations

Greater Positive development associated with:

- female gender (r=.16)
- ↓ ineffective pet parenting (r=.-.18)
- ↑ child's treatment of CA (r=.24)

Greater Oppositional Defiant Behaviour associated with:

- ↑ inconsistent discipline (r=.35)
- ↑ ineffective pet parenting (r=.30)
- ↓ child's treatment of CA (r=.18)

Predicting positive development

	Predictors	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Step		β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2
1	Child gender (m/f) Dog or cat	**.155*** .004	.024	**.165***			
2	Positive Pet Parenting Ineffective Pet Parenting Parent attachment to CA			**.188*** **-.175*** -.042	**.068***	**.178*** -.137	
3	Child's attachment to CA Child's treatment of CA					-.075 **.205***	**.027***

Note. *N* = 206. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** p< .001 Total R² = .119

Predicting oppositional defiant behaviour

Step	Predictors	Model 1 β	Model 1 ΔR^2	Model 2 β	Model 2 ΔR^2	Model 3 β	Model 3 ΔR^2
1	Child gender (m/f) Dog or cat	-.094 .010	.009				
2	Positive Pet Parenting Ineffective Pet Parenting Parent attachment to CA			.096 **.298*** -.077	**.097***	**.256***	
3	Child's attachment to CA Child's treatment of CA					-.011 **-.170***	.025

Note. N = 206. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** p< .001 Total R^2 = .131

Conclusions

- The way parents treat their animal is related to child wellbeing
  - Positive Pet Parenting -> Positive Development
  - Ineffective Pet Parenting -> ODB
- The way children treat their pets is related to child wellbeing
- Need to establish causality
- IF causal links are found then possible intervention targets could be to teach both parents and children responsible, positive interactions with pets

Thank you!

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