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The perceived psychosocial benefits of pet ownership on child development: A parental perspective

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The Perceived Psychosocial Benefits of Pet Ownership on Child Development: A Parental Perspective

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The Perceived Psychosocial Benefits of Pet Ownership on Preadolescent Development

Abstract

The purpose of this review is to explore the beneficial role pets play in facilitating the psychosocial development of preadolescent children. It is proposed that the pet is perceived by both the child and parent as a developmental resource during preadolescent development, as it assists the child in accomplishing key developmental tasks such as responsibility and autonomy, socialisation and the development of humanistic qualities. This review also highlights the importance of pets in assisting preadolescents develop self esteem and identity, and examines how pets give children new perspective on important life matters such as birth, illness and death. Attainment of these developmental tasks ensures a smooth transition into adolescence for the child. Limitations and implications for future research are noted.

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The Perceived Psychosocial Benefits of Pet Ownership on Preadolescent Development

Introduction

An appreciation of the importance of the animal/human bond began to develop momentum in the 1980s. During this time, research in this field largely focused on either the therapeutic or physiological affect of pets on the elderly, mentally and physically impaired populations (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). During the 1970s, Levinson (1967; 1969; 1970; 1972) became a leading researcher in the animal/human bond domain and initiated a surge of interest in the benefits gained by children through the child/pet relationship (Brickel, 1985; Veveers, 1985). His work predominantly focused on using dogs within psychotherapy to assist in counselling emotionally disturbed children (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985; Soares, 1985). Since this initial exploration of the child/pet relationship, subsequent research in this area has predominantly focused on the beneficial aspects of the bond such as the effects on child socialisation, pet care, pet bereavement and attachment within the family system. (Haggerty Davis, 1987; Melson, 2003; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985; Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995).

Given the demonstrated importance of the relationship between children and their pets, it is the purpose of this review to explore how this relationship can positively facilitate the psychosocial development of preadolescent children. Preadolescence is a distinct stage of child development which takes place between the years of nine and twelve (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). The developmental demands unique to the preadolescence period can be explored through applying two stage theories of psychosocial development, devised by Erikson (1959) and Sullivan (1953). The preadolescent period can bring about many new challenges for children. For

example, the child must adapt to sudden changes in their physical appearance, the introduction of age appropriate social roles and an increase in responsibilities or chores (Blythe & Monroe Traeger, 1983; Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). The preadolescent also must adapt to cognitive changes in relation to how they consider themselves and others (Blythe & Monroe Trager, 1983; Sullivan, 1953).

This cognitive and social transformation denotes an important stage of personality development for the child, with specific developmental tasks to be accomplished (Sullivan, 1953). These include a sense of achievement in responsibility and autonomy, the attainment of heightened self esteem and identity, the expansion of nurturing feelings of love, compassion and empathy and the acquisition of adequate social skills (Erikson, 1959; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985; Sullivan, 1953). Preadolescent children must also develop greater understanding at this age of important life lessons such as birth, illness and death, in order to prepare them for situations they will likely encounter in adolescence and later life.

It has been suggested that pets may have the greatest impact on children during the preadolescent years, due to the specific cognitive and social developmental demands encompassed in this period of development (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). Haggerty Davis et al. (1985) and Van Houtte and Jarvis (1995) are the chief scholars to have reported on the importance of pets in facilitating the key developmental tasks of preadolescence, as identified by Erikson (1959) and Sullivan (1953). According to these authors, the psychosocial needs and developmental tasks, which are to be accomplished successfully during preadolescence, could be taught and facilitated through the use of a family pet. They suggest that the extent to which a pet may impact on a child's development is shaped by the perception of the pet as a worthwhile developmental resource, by both the child and the parent (Haggerty Davis

et al., 1985; Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). Therefore, this review will frame the family pet as a developmental resource, perceived by the family as both an educational tool and source of emotional and social support, during the preadolescence phase.

Pets: A Developmental Resource

Socialisation

Within the literature, pets have been depicted as a developmental resource which can facilitate social development during the preadolescent phase (Endenburg & Baarda, 1995; Haggerty Davis, 1987; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985; Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). There is evidence that many preadolescent children obtain emotional and social support from their pets (Melson, 2003). For example, many studies have found that children frequently classify their pet as a close friend (Bryant, 1985; Covert et al., 1985; Haggerty Davis et al., 1985; Salomon, 1981). A study conducted by Bryant (1985) found that 83% of the 7 to 10 year old participants (n=19) surveyed, described their pet as a special friend. In addition, a study conducted by Covert et al. (1985) measured young adolescent's perceptions of what they believe they gain from their pets. Of the children (n=285) interviewed between the ages of 10 and 14, the highest response, from 32% of the female participants and 27% of the male participants, was friendship. Furthermore, Soloman (1981) found through surveying 216 children between the ages of 5 and 13, that 10-11 year olds perceived the companion and playmate roles of their pet as the most important part of their relationship with the pet.

According to the literature, pets are also often perceived by children as attentive and empathic listeners (Covert et al., 1985; Veveers, 1985; Vidovic, Stetic & Bratko, 1999). Haggerty Davis et al. (1985) suggested that as the pet is viewed within the family as being subordinate to its owner, the child can more easily express their

feelings to their pet, just as they would feel comfortable confiding in a peer, or younger sibling. It has been further proposed in the literature that children feel comfortable discussing their private thoughts and wishes with their pets because unlike humans, they can completely trust that they will keep their secrets (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985; Veveers, 1985). MacDonald (1981) surveyed 10 year old preadolescents of both genders (n=31), to identify the perceived social support attained through their relationship with the family dog. The majority of children surveyed believed that their dog could understand what they told them.

Pets are also described throughout the literature as active and energetic playmates, which can help children to strengthen and establish relationships with others (Barker, 1999; Covert et al., 1985; Soares, 1985). Furthermore, the pet is depicted as a practical social resource for the child, due to it being consistently available to interact and play (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985; Jorgenson, 1997). Veveers (1985) described how pets may serve as social lubricants, helping children facilitate relationships or social contact with other children. For example, MacDonald's (1981) study found that 84% of the 10 year olds (n=31) he interviewed reported that social contacts occurred with other children, while they exercised their dogs. It has also been suggested that due to the attractiveness of the child's pet, pet-owning children may be found to be more appealing as a potential friend or playmate to other children, than non-pet owning children (Endenburg & Baarda, 1995).

According to the literature, a key ingredient involved in the relationship between children and their pets is the unconditional love and acceptance the animal provides for the child. In Bryant's (1985) study on pet ownership, the preadolescent participants (n=19) surveyed revealed that as a friend, their pets displayed loyalty, empathy and affection. Many authors have described how pets accept the child as

they are, offering intense feelings of loyalty, and not criticising or judging the child in any way (Beck & Katcher, 1983; Levinson, 1969; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985; Soares, 1985). Due to the intensity of the bond between a child and their pet, it has been suggested that the pet could act as a temporary substitute for human companionship (Sable, 1995; Sharkin & Knox, 2003). This would be particularly useful for children living without other siblings, or for children who are left alone for long periods of time due to parental work conditions (Robin & ten Bensel, 1985; Turner, 2005; Veveers, 1985). However, it should be noted that for healthy development, the pet should only serve in a supportive capacity to the other necessary social bonds a child maintains throughout development (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). Haggerty Davis et al. (1985) explained that a healthy child/pet bond is one which promotes strong development, and does not prevent or hinder other human relationships the child develops.

Self Esteem and Identity

Through regular social interaction with their pet, a child's self esteem or self image may be positively facilitated (Sharkin & Knox, 2003; Turner, 2005). It has been noted within the literature that self esteem increases steadily during the phase of preadolescence to adolescence (Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). The biological, social and cognitive changes which take place during preadolescence can significantly impact on a child's self esteem and sense of identity (Blythe and Monroe Traeger, 1983; Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). For example, during the preadolescent years, children begin to make more involved evaluations of themselves (Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). To assist in exploring this unique developmental phase, Sullivan (1953) devised an interpersonal theory of personality development. According to Sullivan's (1953) theory, the way in which an individual expands and sustains their self image is

directly related to the perceptual feedback they gain from people surrounding them (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). This means that the way in which an individual interprets external perceptions of themselves, positively or negatively affects the individual's image of self (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). This process is referred to by Sullivan (1953) as 'reflected appraisal'.

Through adopting Sullivan's (1953) perspective on personality development, the perceptions held of the child by their peers and family would have a large impact on the development of their self esteem and sense of identity. Haggerty Davis et al. (1985) suggested that pets can also serve to promote self assurance and confidence in the young pet owner. From an animal's perspective, the young child is an all-powerful being, because unlike humans, animals are less likely to recognise or negatively perceive human inadequacies (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985; Levinson, 1969). In addition, in comparison to a peer or family member, a pet does not make considerable interpersonal demands which the child cannot accomplish (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). Therefore, the child/pet relationship is not strained by the concerns of personal inadequacy which often accompany other human relationships (Bruner, 1983, Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). Through facilitating a sense of accomplishment and confidence in the child, the pet serves to function as an ego-extension comparative to self esteem (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). From this perspective, the pet is incorporated into the preadolescent's individual identity, being represented by positive dimensions of the child's self-image (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985).

A small number of studies have attempted to examine the effect of pet ownership on a child's self esteem or sense of identity during preadolescence. A study by Juhasz (1985) examined the impact of pet ownership on self esteem of 12 to 14 year old male and females. The study revealed that when the children were asked to

rank things which made them feel good or satisfied with themselves, participants ranked a pet below parents, but above their peers. A study was conducted by Covert et al. (1985), to test whether there would be a difference in self esteem between young pet owners and non-pet owners, as measured by Coopersmith's Self-Esteem Scale (1967). Covert et al. (1985) surveyed 285 families in the US, with children between the ages of 10 to 14. They found that preadolescent pet owners had higher self esteem than non-pet owners of the same age.

Van Houtte and Jarvis's (1995) study on the effects of pet ownership on self esteem, self concept, autonomy and attachment also found support for the hypothesis that pets would significantly affect self esteem. In their study, 130 third to sixth grade students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, completed interviews and questionnaires on the role of pets during preadolescent development. Fifth and sixth grade pet owners reported higher self esteem than non-pet owning children of the same age, supporting the notion put forward by Haggerty Davis et al. (1985), that pets may have the most important impact on children during preadolescence. In an attempt to rule out confounds, the design of the study involved matching the 'pet owning' and 'non-pet owning' preadolescents on parental marital status, number of siblings and socioeconomic status. It should be noted that the results of the aforementioned studies assessing the self esteem of preadolescents were obtained through correlational designs, and therefore caution must be taken when interpreting these findings. Nevertheless, these studies do demonstrate that the use of pets for children with low self esteem may be a beneficial way to positively strengthen the self image of preadolescents (Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995).

Pet Care

responsibility and autonomy.

Preadolescents may gain support and companionship from their pet, but in contrast, the pet is also dependant on human care for survival and development (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985; Melson, 2003). Melson and Fogel (1989) suggested that nurturing a pet during child development can serve as practice for effective parenting or care-giving for the elderly and ill, in later life. It has been suggested within the literature that from a very young age, boys and girls begin to perceive care-giving as a gender-based responsibility (Melson, 2003, 2007). However in contrast, children of both genders equally perceive pet care as a gender-neutral task (Melson & Fogel, 1989; Melson, 2007).

Haggerty Davis et al. (1985) reported that during the middle years of childhood, interest in caring for pets reaches its highest peak. A study by Melson and Fogel (1996) demonstrated through interviewing parents about their children's interest in pet care, that the appeal of pet care progressively increased between the ages of 5 and 12 years. It is important to note that the degree to which a child is willing to care for a pet, may be determined by the perceived importance the child places on their care-giving role (Haggerty Davis et al, 1985). A study conducted by Rost and Hartmann (1987) found that 92% of the 8 to 10 year olds surveyed believed that the responsibility of pet care was an 'important' or 'very important' element of their relationship with their pet. They also found that 75% of the participants surveyed had exclusive or shared responsibility for the care of the pet.

Much literature has suggested that parents believe pet care promotes individual responsibility in young children (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Vidovec et al., 1999; Cain, 1985; Covert et al., 1985; Salmon and Salmon, 1983). For example, a

study conducted by Albert and Bulcroft (1988), found through interviewing 320 pet owning and 116 non-pet owning parents, that the most reported motivation for obtaining pets for their children, was their perceived usefulness in teaching children independence and responsibility.

During the preadolescent phase, children place a lot of importance on their accomplishments (Erikson, 1959). Often this involves achieving well at school or sport, both of which can be hard to accomplish to the expectancies of others. In contrast to the high standards of quality placed on us by humans, a pet does not impose a large amount of value on the preadolescent's accomplishment of tasks (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). Therefore, being able to meet the needs of their pet in terms of feeding, grooming and disciplining, can be a significant accomplishment for many young children (Endenburg & Baarda, 1995; Haggerty Davis et al., 1985).

Erikson's (1959) Developmental Theory can be applied to gain greater understanding of the responsibility and autonomy developed during pet care. This psychodynamic theory addresses the chronological stages of ego maturation. According to Erikson (1959), the preadolescent child is going through the developmental stage of 'industry versus inferiority'. During this stage, the preadolescent child gains a sense of accomplishment through successfully achieving tasks outside the family environment (Erikson, 1959). If the child fails to develop a sense of accomplishment in their personal achievements, then a crisis in ego can follow (Erikson, 1959; Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). According to Erikson's (1959) theory, this crisis can prevent a child from making a well-adapted change from childhood to adulthood.

In Van Houtte and Jarvis's (1995) study assessing preadolescent's (n=130) autonomy, self concept, self esteem and attachment to pets, partial support was found

for the hypothesis that pet-owners would score significantly higher on an autonomy measure than non-pet owners. The 'pet-owning' group demonstrated greater autonomy on a 'perceives parents as people' subscale of autonomy than the 'non-pet' owning group (Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). It was concluded that pet owners were more able to perceive and imagine their parents in different roles than were the non-pet owning children, and were therefore, found to be more autonomous (Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). Although, Van Houtte & Jarvis's (1995) study used a correlational design to assess the autonomy of young pet owners, their study did attempt to control for extraneous variables through matching the pet owning and non-pet owning children on parental marital status, socioeconomic status and number of siblings. Therefore, this study reveals how pet ownership could be used by parents to help facilitate the development of autonomous qualities in their children, such as responsibility and independence (Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995).

A significant proportion of literature has suggested that caring for a family pet may serve to teach children about responsibility, independence and autonomy, however, Haggerty Davis (1987) rejected this notion. In her (1987) study assessing pet care during preadolescence, it was demonstrated that preadolescents do not regularly care for their family pets. During this study, a group of male and female, 10 to 12 year olds (n=22) completed a dog care responsibility inventory to assess the extent to which children routinely care for their pets. 76% of the children interviewed stated that their mothers assumed the majority of tasks and responsibilities involved in pet care, compared to the rest of the family. Furthermore, 65% of the participants reported that their father was most likely to take responsibility for disciplining the family pet. Haggerty Davis (1987) concluded that for the preadolescent to learn responsibility through pet ownership, he or she is most likely to learn this behaviour

through observing the parents model how to effectively care for and manage the pet, and through the parents positively reinforcing responsible pet care behaviour, when it is consequently exhibited by the children. The conclusion reached by Haggerty Davis (1987) supports the theory introduced by Brickel in 1985 that a learning perspective can explain how children are taught to love and care for animals within the family environment. It must be noted that Haggerty Davis's (1987) study utilized a responsibility inventory specifically developed for the study. Therefore, the differences in findings within the aforementioned studies may be due to the utilization of different research methodologies to measure a child's degree of responsibility and autonomy in pet care.

humanistic qualities.

In addition to responsibility and autonomy, pets can be used by parents to encourage caring and loving responses from their children. It has been suggested within the literature that pets can help teach children about important humanistic qualities such as appropriate forms of compassion, respect, and empathy for others (Bryant, 1985; Melson, 2003; Vidovic et al., 1999). According to Melson (2003), empathy and the ability to understand the feelings of another are important ingredients for developing care-giving behaviour. Vidovic et al. (1999) conducted a study on pet ownership, type of pet and socio-emotional development of fourth (n=265), sixth (n=295), and eighth (n=266) grade school children. Within the socio-emotional variables assessed, the level of empathy was measured by a specifically formulated questionnaire. It was demonstrated that dog owners were more empathetic than non-pet owners. In addition, Bryant (1985) found in her study that 7 and 10 year olds (n=19) who reported having meaningful conversations with their pets also reported increased empathy. Given the type of research conducted, it should be noted that

causal inference should be exercised with caution when assessing the outcomes of these studies, as it is uncertain whether empathic people are more likely to purchase and adopt pets, or if simply owning a pet makes a person more empathetic (Melson, 2003; Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995).

Pets: An Educational Tool – Birth, Illness and Death.

For many children, the family pet serves as an educational tool by providing an opportunity to witness and understand significant life events such as birth, illness and death (Cain, 1985; Haggerty Davis et al., 1985; McNicholas & Collis, 2000). The existing literature on the child/pet relationship has only very briefly touched upon how children can learn about reproduction and birth through observing their pets. In terms of educating children about important life events, the majority of the literature focuses on teaching the child about the reality of illness and death. This area has been hailed by many authors as one of the most important aspects of pet ownership for children, as the death of a pet has been often depicted as an emotional dress rehearsal for coping with experiences of illness and death, which are to occur during the person's life (Robin & ten Bensel, 1985; Sharkin & Knox, 2003; Turner, 2005). Furthermore, it has been consistently recognized within the literature that the death of a pet is often the first experience a child may have of death and bereavement and that through this, they can learn about grief and loss (Cowles, 1985; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985; Sharkin & Knox, 2003). According to Robin & ten Bensel (1985), the child gains an understanding after bereavement, that death is a natural part of life, and although it is distressing, the pain is tolerable and will pass with time.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency within the literature to underestimate the severity of bereavement a child experiences during the process of pet loss (Robert and

ten Bensel, 1985; Sharkin & Knox, 2003). Robin and ten Bensel (1985) suggested that the death of a pet can be a powerful and intense experience for the many children who had formed strong attachments with their pets. In a study by Covert et al. (1985), 285 children between the ages of 10 and 14 were interviewed about their relationship with their pet. When asked about the loss of their pet, 59.5% of the children said that this affected them "a lot". Sharkin & Knox (2003) described how many mental health practitioners believe the type of bereavement experienced after pet loss is comparable to that experienced subsequent to human loss. However, it should be mentioned that this notion has not been empirically validated within the literature (Sussman, 1985). It has been suggested that the intensity of a child's reaction after pet loss would depend largely on the child's age, gender and state of emotional development along with the strength of the bond between the child and pet (Brown et al., 1996; Robin and ten Bensel, 1985; Sharkin & Knox, 2003). It has been cited within the literature that children will often become embarrassed and self conscious about the intensity of their grief and thus may attempt to conceal their sadness from those around them (Robin and ten Bensel, 1985). According to Levinson (1967), the child should be taught by members of the family that feelings of guilt and sadness following the death of a loved one are completely normal.

Implications

The majority of literature focusing on the child/pet relationship generally reports that pets serve to benefit the psychosocial development of preadolescent children. However, the extent of investigations focusing on the beneficial bond between children and their pets is rather limited due to a lack of empirically sound research within the literature. Most of the existing studies addressing the significance of the child/pet relationship employ either descriptive survey or correlational studies,

both of which are incapable of supporting causal statements regarding the direct benefits children gain from pet ownership (Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). Unfortunately this type of research is often influenced by confounds, which can prevent firm causal inferences from being made (Melson, 2003). Therefore, caution must be taken when interpreting the findings of studies of this nature. Nonetheless, it must be noted that it is near impossible for research within this area to be truly experimental (Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). For example, Van Houtte & Jarvis (1995) acknowledged that it is simply not always possible to randomly assign participants according to an independent variable of 'pet-owning' versus 'non-pet owning' status.

Given the lack of reliable, empirical research within the domain of the child/pet literature, it is suggested that future studies attempt to address this matter within experimental research, by ensuring a control group is established within their studies (Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). In Van Houtte and Jarvis's (1995) study which measured third to sixth graders sense of autonomy, self concept, self esteem and attachment to pets, it was proposed that 'pet owners' could be matched to 'non-pet owners' on suitable variables such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, parental or marital status and birth order. A Chi Square Analysis and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were calculated to assess the success of the matching procedure on the variables of parental marital status, socioeconomic status and number of siblings. The matching procedures were deemed successful as the groups were not found to be significantly different on the matching variables employed. Van Houtte & Jarvis (1995) concluded that through the application of matching procedures, the variability in scores between the groups should be less likely due to the influence of nuisance variables, and more likely to express meaningful implications of the child/pet relationship.

Ascione (1992) expressed concern while examining the literature, that the existing research on the child/pet relationship has a predominantly positive focus: primarily exploring the beneficial aspects of the child/pet relationship, whilst barely touching upon the negative aspects which may eventuate through the bond, such as animal cruelty. Ascione (1992) suggested that both the positive and negative consequences of the child/pet relationship should be jointly addressed within a sole study to obtain a complete understanding of how children and pets mutually impact on each other's lives.

Another area of concern cited within the literature is that the majority of existing research merely examines families who own either cats or dogs, in order to attempt to explore the impact of the child/pet relationship. This can be problematic as it is difficult to ascertain whether the results of these studies can serve to generalise to families who own other types of pets such as birds, fish, rabbits or horses. Van Houtte and Jarvis (1995) suggested that future research within the child/pet domain could address this problem by attempting to compare the effects of ownership of cats and dogs to various other types of pets on measures of preadolescent psychosocial development.

Conclusions

Through reviewing the literature it appears that pet ownership brings many benefits for children during the unique period of preadolescent development. However, due to the problematic nature of establishing causal relationships, more consideration must be given to the method of empirical validation of the child/pet relationship. Nevertheless, there is enough existing research within the literature to argue for a renewed growth of interest within academia regarding the impact that pet ownership has on healthy preadolescent development (Melson, 2003). In order for

further research to gain momentum, it is important that the valuable role a pet can play in the development of the preadolescent is further recognized within the scholarly world.

In summation, current research has demonstrated how pets and children have a reciprocally supportive and caring relationship. The pet is perceived as a developmental resource by the child and family, due to its role in assisting the child to engage in and accomplish important developmental tasks and demands such as acquiring adequate social skills, learning how to achieve responsibility and autonomy, and the development of important humanistic qualities such as compassion and empathy (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985; Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). The pet is also perceived as an important educational tool during the preadolescent period through which significant life lessons such as birth, illness and death can be taught to the children at an easy to understand and appropriate level. The pet's influence on the aforementioned task stages serves to enhance a child's personality development and further address the preadolescents need to develop a positive self concept and sense of self worth (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). Exactly how the pet contributes to the child's preadolescent development will naturally fluctuate over this period due to the ever-changing perceptions and needs of the child within the family system, as they meet the demands of each task stage (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). Through assisting the preadolescent child in meeting the changing demands of development, the pet can play a vital role in assuring that the child makes a healthy and well adapted progression into adolescence, and subsequent adulthood (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985).

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July 6, 2007

Running Head: PET OWNERSHIP AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The Perceived Psychosocial Benefits of Pet Ownership on Child Development: A Parental Perspective

Erin K. Leahy

The Perceived Psychosocial Benefits of Pet Ownership on Child Development: A Parental Perspective

Abstract

A qualitative inquiry was conducted to explore the perceived psychosocial benefits of pet ownership on child development, from a parental perspective. Eight parents of primary school aged pet-owning children were interviewed about their child's pet owning experiences. The transcripts were analysed according to the systematic inductive process as postulated by Miles and Huberman (1994). Inductive data analysis revealed positive experiences on many levels, with three major themes regarding the perceived benefits of pet ownership for child development. These included the influence of the parent's pet owning experience; the perceived role of pets as affectionate bond-building human surrogates; and the use of pets for teaching children about the importance of respect for life. Limitations and implications for future research are discussed.

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Submitted: October, 2007

The Perceived Psychosocial Benefits of Pet Ownership on Child Development: A Parental Perspective

Introduction

Over the last few decades, the importance of the animal-human bond has become a prevalent topic within the realm of the social sciences. The increasing interest surrounding the human/animal bond is apt given that in 2005 there were an estimated 38 million household pets in Australia, signifying that there were more pets in the population than human residents (ACAC, 2006). These statistics position Australians within the highest percentage of pet owners in the world, with 63% of Australian households owning a pet of some kind. Out of these Australian households, the highest percentage of pet owners was suburban families with young children (ACAC, 2006).

Within the animal/human bond literature, there has been much written concerning the beneficial psychological and physiological effects of pets on adults (Cole & Gawlinski, 2000; Jorgenson, 1997). These include the beneficial impact of pets on the emotional well-being of adults, through acting as a buffer against loneliness and stress; and the valuable use of pet therapy for people suffering from chronic physiological illness (Brodie & Biley, 1999; Jorgenson, 1997).

In comparison, the child/pet relationship literature largely focuses on the impact of pet ownership on a child's healthy attainment of psychosocial development tasks within the family unit. These tasks include the attainment of affectionate bonds with significant others; achieving a sense of accomplishment in responsibility and autonomy; and the formation of a positive self identity (Corr, 2003). Furthermore the literature has highlighted the importance of pets in teaching children about the continual life cycle of birth and death (Sharkin & Knox 2003).

Given the demonstrated benefits of child pet ownership within the family unit, the following study will serve to explore the perceived psychosocial benefits of pet ownership on child development, from a parental perspective. It is important to explore parental perceptions regarding the child/pet bond because a child's relationship with their pet is shaped largely by their parents own pet-owning beliefs and actions.

Psychosocial Development

Pets have been depicted within the literature as playing a vital part in the healthy psychosocial development of children (Covert et al., 1985; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985). The period of childhood spans from birth to approximately 12 years of age (Levinson, 1972). This developmental era encompasses a number of important cognitive, social and emotional developmental tasks, all of which can be facilitated by a family pet. These tasks include the acquisition of basic trust and self esteem, a sense of responsibility and competence, development of empathic consideration for others and the achievement of autonomy (Levinson, 1972; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985). The consistent presence of pets during this phase can help children move along the development continuum and may even ameliorate psychological and emotional issues, such as stress or loneliness (Robin and ten Bensel, 1985).

A major developmental task of childhood is the movement away from the primary symbiotic relationship held with parental figures, to establish a separate and distinct identity (Erikson, 1980). This process of separation often creates feelings of 'separation anxiety' for the child (Perin, 1981). Pets can function as transitional objects during this stressful phase, allowing children to feel safe when not in the presence of their parents (Covert et al., 1985; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985).

Furthermore, the security of the pet may encourage exploratory behaviour of the child and serve as a facilitator towards relationships with other children (Endenburg & Baarda, 1995; Robin & ten bensel, 1985).

An additional important task of childhood is the development of responsibility and empathic consideration for others. Caring for a pet can play an important role in teaching children about responsibility and respect for dependable creatures. The successful care of a pet can also promote a sense of importance and confidence in the child's abilities (Levinson, 1972). The facilitation of a sense of accomplishment is very important for the development of a child's positive self identity (Erikson, 1980).

A child's identity and self esteem formation is an important task of middle childhood and is largely dependant on the opportunity to interact with and learn from significant others (Levinson, 1972). Therefore, through regular positive social interaction with their pet, a child's self esteem or self image may be positively facilitated (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985). Haggerty Davis et al. (1985) suggested that the pet may be incorporated into the child's individual identity, being represented by positive dimensions of the child's self-image.

Several theories can be applied to explain how pets positively facilitate the distinct task stages involved in the healthy psychosocial development of children. These include: Bowen's (1978) Family Systems theory; Brickel's (1985) Social Learning theory; and Bowlby's (1969; 1973; 1980) Attachment theory. These theories aid in explaining how the perceived role of pets is transformed within the family system; how parents teach children to emotionally and physically relate to animals; and how pets have the potential to provide opportunities for attachment and nurturance of others (Sable, 1995).

The Family System

Literature to date has highlighted the important role that pets play in contributing to the growth and well-being of children within the family system (Sharkin & Knox, 2003; Soares, 1985). Emphasis has been placed on the importance of taking into account the dynamics of the family when studying the child/pet relationship (Cain, 1985). Bowen's (1978) Family Systems theory can be applied to examine how the perceived role of the family pet is transformed through family dynamics (Cain, 1985). In this instance, pets form part of the intertwined emotional structure of the family. As a result, the role of the pet within the family will be dependant upon the emotional and physical strengths and weaknesses of each of its members, and the collective strength of the family as a whole (Levinson, 1969; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985). Therefore, through actively receiving and contributing to the collected sum of family affection, pets can contribute to the overall emotional state of the family (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). For example, pets can function as sources of support and affection in family structures where there is a limited number of significant others such as divorced, separated and widowed families, or families with an 'only child'.

Many studies have focused on the variety of special roles a pet takes on to enhance the quality of family life within the family system. It has been suggested that pets may increase expressions of affection and facilitate communication and interaction, within the family environment (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). In addition, pets have been shown to assist in coping with stressors within the family system and to increase the general delight and happiness experienced within the family home (Sharkin & Knox 2003, Tannen 2004). These demonstrated benefits of child pet

ownership could assist in explaining why many parents make the decision to get a pet while their children are developing (Sussman 1985).

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory can be employed to understand the role that pets play in a child's psychosocial development. Brickel (1985) argues that social learning principles of classical, operant and observational learning are engaged by parents to teach children how to relate emotionally to animals. For example, parents can draw on classical conditioning principles to make sure that their child's initial experiences with the family pet are rewarding, in order to ensure for future positive interactions with animals. In addition, observational learning can be utilised by the parents to model the type of behaviour they would like their children to exhibit in regards to responsible and loving pet care. Finally, the third principle of operant learning follows classical and observational learning in sequence, by promoting parental monitoring, shaping and reinforcement of the child's subsequent responses to the family pet. In order to maintain the desirable child/pet interaction, care is given to ensure only desirable learning experiences are experienced.

Brickel (1985) suggested that although unaware of the specific psychological processes involved, parents are usually more successful than psychologists in shaping the attitudes and behaviours of their children. Therefore, through parents consistently engaging social learning principles within the family home, pets can help serve as a valuable tool in teaching children meaningful lessons regarding responsibility, companionship and respect for life (Sussman 1985). Furthermore, pets can also teach and encourage loving and caring responses from children, an important learning component in any child's development.

Attachment Theory

A framework of attachment developed by Bowlby (1969; 1973; 1980) can also be used to explore the beneficial affectionate relationship between children and their pets. Based on psychoanalytical object relations theory, attachment theory adds concepts from ethology (animal behaviour), cognitive psychology, and control theory, to explain an intrinsic capacity to form lasting emotional bonds with others, and to account for the effects disruption of these attachments has on mental health (Sable, 1995). According to Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969), developing strong bonds in the early developmental years is essential for mental health throughout later life (Combrink-Graham, 2006; Salter-Ainsworth, 1989).

From an attachment perspective, pets have the potential to provide opportunities for attachment and the nurturance of others (Sable, 1995). The emotional bond of attachment between a child and their pet can promote a sense of safety, security and well-being in the child (Sable, 1995). This affectionate bond fills a combination of emotional needs for the child by providing a consistent sense of unconditional love and acceptance, and non-judgemental social support, at virtually anytime it may be required (Brown, Richards & Wilson, 1996; Corr, 2004). Furthermore, within this attachment model, pets can serve as a surrogate for human attachment by being perceived as a trustworthy friend or sibling: a stimulating focus and companion in their everyday activities (Robin & ten Bensel, 1985; Sussman, 1985).

As pets can assume an important attachment role in the lives of children, it follows that the loss of a pet can have a significant impact on the family and child (Cowles, 1985; Turner, 2005). Many individual differences can influence the intensity and duration of a child's grief reaction to pet loss including: the degree of

attachment to the pet; a child's age and sex; circumstances surrounding the loss; and the perceived degree of understanding received from others regarding the loss (Sharkin & Knox, 2003).

The Present Study

The literature has highlighted how parents are capable of influencing the important roles pets play in the healthy psychosocial development of children, by teaching their children how to emotionally relate to and appropriately care for animals. However, the parental perceptions regarding the beneficial impact pets have on their children's well-being are less clear. Nevertheless, given the evidence that pets are pivotal members in the family system, parents appear to be supporting the role of pets within the family unit. Therefore, the proposed study aims to explore the perceived psychosocial benefits of child pet ownership, from a parental perspective.

It is possible that the information given by parents about child pet ownership could inform the psychological literature by providing a more comprehensive understanding of parental perspectives on the developmental needs of children, and how pets attempt to address these needs. This would supplement the perspectives obtained from psychological literature from children who have been interviewed about the importance of pet ownership. The implications of this research can provide relevant information on the significant value of pets for childhood development to prospective pet owners and parents of young children. In order to provide adequate provision for families, it is important to have up-to-date literature on such a potentially significant group of individuals. Therefore, the following research question was formulated: "How do parents perceive pet ownership will benefit their child's psychosocial development?"

Method

Research Design

Given the exploratory nature of the topic, the qualitative design of the study was guided by thematic content analysis methodology, as postulated by Miles and Huberman (1984; 1994). Thematic content analysis is an inductive form of data analysis where by themes are continually examined and extracted from the transcribed data. Through utilising this approach, the lived experiences and multiple realities of a group of people were explored from their own perspective. The central focus of the design was to discover how the participants made sense of their own experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

A semi-structured interview format was utilised with questions specifically formulated to elicit a meaningful account of the participant's own experience. Under the semi-structured format, each participant was subject to the same questions to aid in confirmability. However, careful consideration was given not to bias the interview with the researcher's own experience (Banister et al., 1994).The format of the interview was deliberately informal and individually adapted to each participant in order to allow for a steady flow in conversation, and establish rapport between the researcher and participant (Smith, 1995).

Upon the completion of each interview, the audio recordings were immediately transcribed. The transcribed data were subsequently analysed using thematic content analysis. In order to identify the major themes and issues within the text, a cyclical process of systematic data reduction, display and interpretation was administered, as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1984; 1994). During analysis, comparisons were continually noted between the participant's stories. This allowed the researcher to derive and interpret meaning from the participant's experience.

Considerable thought was exercised in addressing confirmability and transferability during the data analysis phase through administering triangulation and member checking (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This involves using multiple sources or modes of evidence and enables the researcher to verify the findings and make more valid interpretations (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Participants

Eight parents who had obtained a pet for their child when they were between the ages of four and twelve participated in the study. Seven of the participants were female and one was male. All participants lived within the metropolitan area of Perth. The participant's children consisted of ten males and four females. The average age of the children when they acquired a pet was eight years old. All interviews were conducted at a convenient location negotiated between the participant and researcher. To protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms were utilised during the data analysis period.

Data Collection

The interview schedule consisted of a series of questions and prompts following a semi-structured format (see Appendix A). Initial questioning was phrased broadly to initiate general discussion and to avoid bias on behalf of the researcher. For example, the first question was broadly phrased "Could you tell me about your child's experience of growing up with a pet?" Subsequent questioning focused on specific subject areas, allowing for a more thorough examination of the research topic (Smith, 1995). Although the researcher utilised the interview schedule to guide the core areas of discussion, the interview structure was left intentionally flexible to encourage participants to openly narrate the story of their own unique experience. Therefore, the flow of the interview was significantly influenced by the individual participant.

Before the commencement of interviews, a pilot interview was conducted with an acquaintance of the researcher who shared similar demographic status to the participants. This assisted in addressing the suitability of the scope of questioning (Breakwell, 1995). To further assess face validity and suitability of the question range, two academic staff members of the School of Psychology appraised the interview schedule.

Procedure

Following approval from the Ethics Committee to conduct the research, copies of an information letter (see Appendix B) and demographic sheet (see Appendix C) were sent electronically to potential participants recruited from the Edith Cowan University Participant Register. The Participant Register consists of a list of students who have agreed to be contacted by potential researchers. The Participants Register Coordinator contacted the researcher with the contact details of a group of potential participants which appeared to fit the demographic criteria set out by the researcher, in the information letter. Following the distribution of the information letter, five participants contacted the researcher who fit the demographic criteria of the study. A further three participants were recruited through the technique of snowballing from the aforementioned participants.

Following an expression of interest in the study, an interview location and date was arranged at the convenience of the participants. Prior to the interview, participants were given a consent form (see Appendix D) to sign. At this stage the participants were given the opportunity to further enquire about the research project and interview process. Three of the interviews took place in the university library; three in the participant's home; and two in the participant's place of work. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were audio taped.

Throughout the interview process, the researcher remained aware of the biases she possessed, for like the participant's children, she also owned a pet during her childhood. It is of the researcher's opinion that rapport was enhanced during the interview process as participants queried the researcher about her own pet owning experience. In an attempt to address the power dynamic between researcher and participant, it was decided not to visibly attend to the questions or note take during the interview. Therefore, the interview was conducted 'with' the participant rather than 'on' the participant (Banister et al., 1995). All interviews were conducted by the same researcher. As a result of addressing researcher effects of similarity, power dynamics, and maintaining post interview supervisory debriefings, confirmability of the interview data was increased. (Breakwell, 1995).

At the conclusion of the interview the participants were thanked for their contribution to the study and offered a list of informative and support organisations for their well-being (see Appendix E). Participants were encouraged to view the final research project once completed. Following each interview, the researcher recorded thoughts and impressions in a journal to assist in the analysis process. The entire data collection period took approximately four weeks.

Data Analysis

As part of the qualitative method, data analysis begins during the data collection phase, with a focus on particular participants. Subsequently, the data is slowly reduced to generalisations (Smith, 1995). Upon the completion of interviews, the audio-taped recordings were transcribed verbatim. Before the commencement of analysis, transcripts were studied repeatedly to gain an overall impression of the data. The transcripts were then analysed using thematic content analysis techniques as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). These consisted of a cyclical process of data

reduction, data display, and data verification involving the use of coding, clustering and theme identification. To assist in theme verification and conclusion drawing a reflective journal was utilised during the data analysis phase.

During transcription, a triple column data display was used to record themes and reflections. The left hand column was assigned for recording thoughts and impressions on the topics discussed and issues of personal bias; the middle column contained the interview, which was transcribed verbatim; and the right hand column was allocated for the recording of themes and sub themes, identified from the text. The aim of the triple column display was to allow the meaning of the experiences denoted in the interviews to emerge inductively from the transcribed data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A question ordered matrix (see Appendix F) was utilised to aid in the data reduction process (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The columns of the matrix were organised so that the researcher could examine individual participant responses to each interview question. The columns were assigned for participant responses and the rows were assigned for each participant. The question ordered matrix enables the researcher to both examine the overall response of each participant, and to compare and identify recurrent themes and issues across the scope of participants.

During data reduction the data was coded and segmented through the categorisation of themes (Tesch, 1990). Significant, recurring phrases were highlighted in the text and emerging themes were documented in a blank margin on the side of each transcript. Number codes were created to represent categories of the emerging themes and similar categories were clustered together according to their frequency under additional codes, signifying the most significant themes. The research journal was consulted to aid in the interpretation of the data.

A method of member checking, as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1984; 1994) was utilized to address confirmability and transferability. This involved contacting a sample of participants to verify the validity of the researcher's interpretation. Triangulation was employed to assist in minimising researcher bias and increase the credibility of the interpretation. An associate of the researcher assessed the researcher's interpretation of the themes to help ensure the validity of the findings.

Findings and Interpretations

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of parents who had decided to obtain a pet for their child during their psychosocial development. Inductive data analysis revealed positive experiences on many levels, particularly those which concerned companionship for children and education about respect for life. Three major themes, each incorporating two sub-themes were generated from the data (See Table 1).

Table 1

Categories of Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
Influence of parent's pet owning experience	Pet ownership during childhood
	Sharing a common interest
Companionship	Human substitution
	Affectionate bond
Respect for life	Responsible and humane treatment of animals
	Pet loss

Influence of Parent's Pet Owning Experience

pet ownership during childhood

Pet ownership during childhood was a common issue raised by the parents interviewed. Out of the eight participants interviewed, five initiated discussion of their own experiences growing up with a pet. For example, Sandra stated: *"I'd had two dogs...so we decided to get her a puppy*". Belsky (1981) postulated a model of parental functioning which theorises a strong link between parental style and a parent's own developmental experience. This theory suggests that a parent's own positive childhood pet owning experiences could account for their belief that their children will benefit from pet ownership during their psychosocial development (Endenburg & Baarda, 1995).

One participant spoke of how her positive childhood pet experience affected her decision to obtain a pet for her child: *"It keeps him company. I was like that when I was a kid with my dog...I'd talk to it. It was like another person...you can talk to them when you have problems...I think he will eventually with the kitten...I think having a pet helps them"* (Danielle). Similarly from another participant: *"When 'James' was old enough to have a pet that he could use for comfort...that's why, I was always brought up with animals as a child. So I had grown up with dogs and cats... so that's why we got them"* (Tracey). An additional participant spoke positively of how her children could learn about sexual reproduction through watching their animals, as she had as a young child: *"...if they asked, I would tell them as simply as I could what was happening...because I know when I was younger, I learnt about that from watching animal behaviour as well...I grew up on a farm...I always thought it was a good way...because my dad, he would just tell us as it was...there was no great conspiracy, that was just the way it was"* (Maria).

In comparison to the other participants, Janice reported how she was not allowed to own a pet when she was younger and how this negatively perceived experience impacted on her decision to obtain pets for her own children: *"I always wanted to get pets for my children because I wasn't allowed to have pets when I was younger. I begged and begged, but my dad wouldn't give in...I didn't want my children to miss out on so much like I had"* (Janice). When asked how she knew what she had missed out on, Janice described how even though she was unable to own a pet as a child, her bond with animals had always been strong: *"I always had a strong bond with animals from a young age...it was just a very natural thing for me. So I wasn't surprised that 'Tom' turned out the same...he had a very intense bond with Cooper"* (Janice). The positive social interaction Janice had experienced with animals during her childhood development represented a positive dimension of her identity and therefore, influenced her decision to obtain pets for her own children (Haggerty Davis et al., 1985).

sharing a common interest

Levinson (1972) reported how pets may be one of the only common interests shared by both parents and children. He suggested that caring for the family pet may be one of the sole activities in which they both agree on and share a strong common interest. For example, Janice spoke of how she and her son shared equivalent views on how to responsibly care for an animal: *"...I think he (husband) killed her with kindness...he was constantly feeding her...Tom didn't agree with that way of taking care of an animal. It was against his views and mine of how to care for an animal. I suppose because pets need to be looked after properly for their best interests – health wise"*. Social learning theory as outlined by Brickel (1985) can be applied to understand how parent's previous experiences can impact on a child's experience.

Brickel (1985) illustrated the presence of a positive emotional association between pets and people. He suggested that through our parent's own emotional association with animals, children can learn to perceive animals in a particular manner within the family system.

Cain (1983) found in her study of pets in the family system that families reported increased closeness expressed around the care of the pet and more time spent together through playing jointly with the pet. For example, from Maria: *"... if we go outside, we might take the dog for a walk...we enjoyed doing that"*. In addition, Fiona expressed how much fun their family had interacting with their pets: *"so you'd have the whole, basically a whole army of different sorts of animals and people, out in the paddocks...just basically interacting...they're a lot of fun...just to have them around"*.

Companionship

human substitution

Veveers (1985) described how animals often function as a surrogate for human relationships by closely interacting with family members within the family unit. In support of this concept, Salmon and Salmon (1983) concluded from their research that the basis of the human/pet bond seems to correspond with human/human bonds. The participant findings are consistent with this theory, with many of the participant's children denoting human attributes when describing how their pets are viewed as members of the family: *"they see it as part of the family...we've taken it away on family holidays with us...yeah I would say that the dog is just part of the family...the kids treat it like it's another human being"* (John). Similarly from Tracey: *"...he'd go and jump in the bed with them and was always made to feel like one of the family..."*. Also: *"I think they view them as a family member really, it's just kind of a part of the furniture and always there...definitely part of the family"* (Carly).

Two of the parents interviewed had an 'only child' and expressed how they had they hoped their child's pet would serve as a companion or substitute sibling for the child: *"he really wanted a kitten...we're not from Perth, so we don't have a lot of family here...I suppose with being an only child you obviously don't...I mean, when you have three kids you have a pecking order. But when there's just one kid it's like, they don't realise that they can't always get what they want so I wanted him to realise that he's got to have responsibility...and it keeps him company*" (Danielle). *"Because she's an only child...I had broken up with her dad, so there was just sort of myself and her living together...so I thought it would sort of be, sort of like a playmate for her and also, a companion"* (Sandra). Research conducted by Hart (2000) suggests that 'only children' are even more likely to develop a close and caring relationship with their pet compared to children with siblings. Turner (2005) suggested that the relationship takes on similar dimensions to that displayed by siblings.

Sharkin and Knox (2003) described how the family pet can take on the role of a companion in a child's daily activities. According to these researchers, a pet can be a source of comfort to the child by providing support and unconditional love. Consistent with the literature, many participants described how their child's pet served as a friend and confidant to their child: *"when they were on their own and sought company...because the animals loves you no matter what...and maybe if they wanted to get away as well...and they just went and dealt with the animal instead"* (Maria). Similarly, John stated: *"Kay said she used the dog as comfort when she was fighting with mum and dad and the dog was her best friend no matter what... "*. Also from Sandra: *"They are thick as thieves! They run around the house in circles together and she gives her snacks...she jumps in the bath with her sometimes...and she's really hers. Like her best mate really"*.

affectionate bond

Many parents described how their children exhibited a high level of attachment to their pets. For example, Janice depicted her son's strong bond with his pet dog: *"The attachment Tom had with Cooper was just huge...that didn't surprise me at all. He was always a huge animal lover...he had a very intense bond with Cooper"* (Janice). According to the literature, establishing affectionate bonds with animals is an essential precursor to the socio-emotional development of young children (Melson, 2003). Therefore, the bonds children develop with their pets can assist children in building bonds with people during their psychosocial development and in later life.

Many participants described how their children were given specific pets which were their own: *"We did have specific pets for each of them, you know? One specific pet, which they could have..."* (Maria). Similarly from Fiona: *"Yeah, it's his particular pet...he treats it like a little person!"* Janice explained how assigning specific pets for her children affected the intensity of their bond with their pets: *"The dog was Tom's really...he'd been begging for one as long as I can remember. So, although he was part of the family, he was predominantly Tom's...because it was always known that the dog was Tom's. That affected the way that Jarrod bonded with the dog. He didn't have as close a bond. Tom was very close to the dog".*

When asked about the consistency of their child's bond with their pet, most participants reported that the bond waxed and waned during their child's development. From Sandra: *"She gets annoyed with her sometimes because sometimes she can be a bit demanding...sometimes when she's upset she'll turn to Princess...she'll get on her bed and snuggle up with her...and talk to her".* Also: *"Trent was initially really wanting the cat all the time and then he kinda well you*

know, just backed off it a little...whereas Nicole's attachment's gotten stronger with the pets" (Carly). One participant expressed how she believed fluctuation in bond intensity was normal for developing children: *"How deeply they cared about their animals at times was really interesting...sometimes they are really fond of their animals and other times they just wish them away. They don't want to have them...which is normal."* (Maria). Maria's view is supported by theory put forward by Haggerty Davis and McCreary Juhasz (1985) that the perception of a pet as a close companion is influenced by the ever-changing demands of development and therefore will naturally fluctuate during development.

Respect for Life

responsible and humane treatment of animals

The majority of participants expressed how they believed pet ownership was an important way to teach children about responsibility and respect for the vulnerability and dependency of animals: *"I've always believed you know, pets are so, so important for teaching people actually respect for life and to actually take on something that needs to be looked after, they're just totally dependant on you for their well-being...being responsible for something that actually needs your help"* (Fiona). *"...how to look after something else, how to care for something...animals are very vulnerable, they need our love and respect...I think I wanted them to learn that"* (Janice). Carly and Maria were unanimous in their views on how children needed to care for their pets, even if they didn't want to.: *"(it teaches them) respect for other creatures and responsibility, you have to feed it even if you don't want to, it still needs to be fed!"* (Carly). *"I think it's really important for children to learn about responsibility...and pets are a good way to teach them...and even if they got sick of the pet, they still have to continue looking after them"* (Maria).

Although parents believe that pets can teach children about the importance of responsibility, most participants found that their children did not routinely take on as much responsibility in caring for their animals as they had anticipated. For example: *"I thought it would sort of help them be a bit more responsible, but it's ended up that I'd look after them or that my wife looks after them. Sam does feed the dog and cat, that's his job...but reluctantly yeah. Not too enthusiastic about it"* (John). *"They begged to have a dog, and they said "we'll feed him, we'll take him for walks, we'll do this, we'll do that!" It lasted well, about six months!...I think next time I would definitely have a contract saying "Right, we do this and this is what you have to do!"* (Tracey). *"The animals were fed...they all had responsibilities and jobs...it lasted about three weeks, and after that it's a chore! It comes and goes I think"* (Maria). These findings are consistent with research conducted by Haggerty Davis (1987) who found through interviewing primary school aged children (n=22) that children did not consistently care for their pets.

Although participants were disillusioned by the consistency of their child's pet care, they still believed that their children learnt how to responsibly care for a pet through watching their parent's exhibit responsible pet care. For example: *"...feeding...that's about it basically!...most of the time with a little prompting!...but they knew how to take care of them"* (Fiona). Similarly from Danielle: *"They don't like cleaning up after them...but he knows that he has to look after it, because he told me that"*. These findings provide support for Brickel's (1985) learning theory. He suggested that children could learn appropriate pet care behaviour through observing and modelling the behaviour of older family members. Through this process the child's responses can become conditioned through witnessing the ensuing rewarding or punishing consequences of the older family member's behaviour (Brickel, 1985).

Many parents believed that taking on the responsibility of caring for a pet, would teach their children how to be more empathetic and gentle. For example, Danielle illustrated the importance of teaching her child to see things from the pet's point of view: *"He actually threw his kitten the other day, he threw it and I said "you have to remember that she's just like a human being" they have feelings too...the hardest part about having a little kid with pets is that they don't realise what hurts them...I think sometimes they can be just like a toy to them...they end up realising, it can just take them a while"* (Danielle). Similarly, from Sandra: *"I often use that when she's reluctant to take her for a walk. I try to say "she's been in the house all day, while you've been at school and I've been at work. She's been alone all day"...and she'll say "oh, ok"..."*. Carly relates: *"...being gentle, that's nurturing...and they can't hurt it! Yeah, that's definitely important, especially being gentle with the cat..."She's doing that because she doesn't like what you're doing to her"* (Carly). Tracey's response summed up the sentiments of many of the participants: *"I think it taught them empathy and to nurture small children and animals...to be gentle...I think it teaches kid's patience too, to be a little more patient with animals...they don't always want to do what they want them to"* These findings are consistent with the perspective offered by Melson (2003; 2007) who suggests that children who own pets feel more empathy for other people, because they learn to understand the feelings and needs of the animals that are dependant on them.

pet loss

The literature suggests that pets can serve an important role in children's lives by providing an opportunity to gain understanding and respect for the cyclical process of life and death (Brown, Richards & Wilson, 1996; Cowles, 1985; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985). Since all eight of the participant's children had dealt with pet loss

during their development this was found to be a significant issue. The participants were in agreement in their beliefs that pet loss was an important way for their children to learn about the meaning of life and death: *"He wasn't too sad about his dog...he's already dealt with death with his uncle passing away...so he knows...I think it's good for children to understand that. To understand what death is...it's another part of life, things get old...the cycle goes around"* (Danielle). Also: *"...dying is a part of life...my grandmother is really not well...it'll be interesting to see how she handles that because she hasn't ever had a person die in her life. I wonder if whether some of what she's learnt through the animals, and going through that grief process will help her?..."* (Sandra).

The loss of a beloved pet has been depicted within the literature as an emotional dress rehearsal for coping with experiences of illness and death, which are to occur during the person's life (Cain, 1985; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985; Turner, 2005). However, two participants shared different views on the comparison between human loss and pet loss. From Maria: *"the other reason I always thought it was good to have pets was to learn about death, because it's usually not as dramatic as when someone close to them dies and it's a good was to explain to them that this is life...this is what happens"* (Maria). In contrast, Janice felt quite strongly that the grief following pet loss was comparable to that subsequent to human loss *"I think a lot of people don't understand what...what it's really like. It makes me very angry when people say "Oh, it's only a dog"...I think it hurts as much as when a human dies who you are close to"* (Janice). Janice's interpretation is supported by researchers, Katcher and Rosenburg (1979) and Rynearson (1978) who have reported that many pet owners are reluctant to openly express their grief due to perceived negative societal attitudes toward the intensity of the human/animal bond. Similarly,

children may also be hesitant to openly share their feelings of grief, subsequent to pet loss if they do not perceive those around them as being accepting of the importance of their relationship with their pet (Sharkin & Knox, 2003).

Several participants described how their family took part in burial or memorial rituals after the loss of a pet. For example: *"Sally was in tears dealing with the loss...we buried it together in the backyard and made a little cross for it...banged it in the ground and put his name on there and Lucy got his collar and hung it around the cross...she had a little picture of him by her bed and stuff like that for a while..."* (John). Also: *"...the dog I was talking about...we had to put him down...when I told her that was what we were going to do, she said we have to have a special last day for it, so we went and bought chicken, and took it to the park, and she made this like, bed for her...and she decorated the bed with Christmas decorations...and we took a photo, we took photos that day. When the fish died...she was absolutely devastated...we had a funeral, and buried it, and put a cross on it's grave"* (Sandra). The literature suggests that these burial rituals may assist in bringing closure to the grieving process and serve to honour the course of life (Brown, Richards & Wilson, 1996; Quackenbush, 1982; Stewart, 1983).

Two participants described how they believed it was important to replace the pet after pet loss in order to ease the child's pain and teach them that life goes on: *"...and then he was gone...sometimes it's good to replace...just wait a little while"* (Danielle). *"We went a couple of days without getting another dog, well we only lasted two or three days, then we got another dog, that seemed to help...that cheered them up no end"* (John). Cowles (1985) suggests that the choice of whether to replace a pet should be an individual decision based on grief resolution. She believes that grief is a painful, yet necessary human response to loss and should therefore not be

repressed or avoided through the replacement of a new pet. After healthy grief resolution, the bereaved pet owner will eventually encounter a readiness to emotionally reinvest in a new pet (Cowles, 1985).

Conclusions

The aim of the present study was to explore the experiences of parents who had chosen to obtain pets for their children during their development. Utilising a framework of psychosocial development (Covert et al., 1985; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985), it was found that the child pet ownership experience was perceived as extremely positive by this group of parents. Much of this satisfaction seemed to result from a high degree of congruence between the demonstrated beneficial relationship between their child and family pet, and their own personal pet ownership beliefs and experiences.

The participant's positive descriptions of their's child pet ownership experience are consistent with the research on the benefits of child pet ownership (Melson, 2003; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985; Sable, 1995). The majority of participants expressed how their children experienced positive feelings of friendship and companionship through their relationship with the family pet. The strong attachment exhibited between the participant's children and their pets was found to serve as a practical substitute for a lack of human companionship; and a viable method of affectionate bond building, useful for developing attachment bonds with other animals and humans throughout the developmental period, and later life (Sable, 1995). Furthermore, participants expressed satisfaction regarding how through the experience of pet ownership, their children gained insight and respect for the cyclical process of life and death (Robin & ten Bensel, 1985). In addition, through modelling the correct behaviour of their parents within the family home, the participant's

expressed how their children were shown to responsibly and humanely care for animals (Brickel, 1985).

The most important finding for this study is that for this group of parents, the influence of their prior or current pet owning experience seemed to facilitate the high level of satisfaction derived from their child's perceived experience. Therefore, pet ownership experiences of parents appeared to influence the way they encouraged and supported their own child's affectionate and caring relationship with the family pet. Furthermore, pet ownership provided the catalyst for greater depths of understanding and connectedness between the parents and their children, as a consequence of the shared involvement in caring for the family pet (Levinson, 1972).

Limitations of the Study

The study could be potentially limited by the uneven gender proportion of participants interviewed. Out of the eight participants, only one was male. It is possible that the views of mothers and fathers could differ regarding the importance of child pet ownership. Furthermore, there may be sampling bias in the current study due to the non random sampling method of recruiting participants via advertised requests. It is possible that only participants who found the experience positive were inclined to respond. Due to the absence of negative narrative in the present study, sampling bias must be considered. However, the possibility that pet ownership can positively impact on a child's psychosocial development cannot be ruled out.

Implications

This study contributes towards the understanding parents require to encourage the healthy development of their children, by recognising the psychosocial needs which can be met through the child/pet relationship. Given that the child pet ownership experience can have a positive impact on the psychosocial development of

children, suggests that parents of young children may benefit from the findings of this study (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985). Furthermore, family practitioners and veterinary professionals might find it helpful to provide information for parents seeking knowledge regarding the important benefits of child pet ownership. In addition, clinical professionals may consider the findings of this study useful for examining and modifying family dynamics, within a therapeutic setting.

Future Research

The present study provides a conceptual framework to guide a more detailed exploration of the perceived benefits of child pet ownership. Future research could employ a blend of qualitative and quantitative methodology in order to allow for generalisation. It would be useful to make comparisons between psychosocial developmental outcomes for pet owning children and non-pet owning children. Furthermore, the present study could also be expanded to explore the psychosocial benefits of pet ownership for chronically ill children or children experiencing developmental difficulties.

In conclusion, the findings illustrated the participant's positive feelings regarding the beneficial roles pets play in their child's psychosocial development. The findings are important not only for extending knowledge on this potentially significant cohort of individuals, but also to inform parents of young children and those who work with families in therapeutic settings, in order to facilitate greater understanding of the importance of pets in the lives of children and families.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

To begin, would you mind if I gathered a bit more information about yourself?
If yes, complete the following questions together:

- Do you have any children?
- If so, what are their ages?
- How many pets do you own?
- Did you buy or adopt any of your pets for your child(ren)?
- If so, what types of pets were they?
- What are the names of your pets?
- How old were your children when you bought them the pet(s)?

Can you tell me about your child's experience of growing up with a pet?

- Is this what you expected?
- Has anything taken you by surprise?
- Why did you decide to purchase or adopt a pet for your child?

Could you describe your child's relationship with the pet(s)?

- Has this relationship changed as your child has developed?
- What sort of regular activities does your child take part in with the pet?

How do you think your child views their relationship with the pet(s)?

- Describe how your pet is viewed within the structure of your family.

Appendix B

Information Sheet for Potential Participants

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Erin Leahy, and I am a student studying Psychology Honours at Edith Cowan University. It is a requirement of the Psychology Honours course that I undertake a research project. This project has been approved by the Edith Cowan Faculty of CHS Ethics Committee.

I have decided to research and explore the topic of pet ownership and child development. The aim of my research is to discover what sorts of psychosocial benefits parents perceive their children will gain from pet ownership, and how they believe this will impact on their child's development.

To be included in this study you must have purchased or adopted a pet for your child. When you purchased or adopted this pet, your child must have been between the ages of 4 and 12 years.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will meet with you in person to conduct a tape-recorded interview. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes to complete. The interview will be conducted in a relaxed, conversational style. Please be assured that I am interested in anything you have to say regarding the topic at hand; there are absolutely no right or wrong answers to this interview.

Information given throughout the interview will remain strictly confidential between my supervisors and myself, with any identifying information being erased from my final research presentation. You have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time and are free to refuse to answer any part of the interview, without prejudice. Once the interview has been transcribed, the tape-recording will be erased. Participants are encouraged to view the completed research project at the end of this year.

If you are considering participating in this study, please complete the attached demographics sheet and email the completed sheet to the email address provided. Once I have received your completed form, I will contact you within two weeks to arrange a meeting time for the interview to take place.

If you have any questions and concerns, or you simply wish to discuss any area of the study, please feel free to contact me on 0412 460 931 or erinl@ecu.edu.au, or my supervisors; Dr Elizabeth Kaczmarek and Dr Deirdre Drake on (08) 6304 5193 and (08) 6304 5020 respectively. Alternatively, if you wish to contact someone who is not connected to this particular study, please contact Dr Dianne McKillop on (08) 6304 5736. Thankyou for reading this information sheet, and for showing interest in this study.

Erin Leahy **Please keep this information sheet for your own reference**

Appendix C

Demographic Sheet

Dear Potential Participant,

This sheet has been prepared to help ensure that the needs of my study are met. If after reading the information sheet you are still interested in participating in this study, please complete this form. To complete the form simply enter text where a question has been asked, or place a cross (X) on the right hand side of the appropriate answer (i.e. YES X NO). Please forward the completed demographic sheet to the following email address: erinl@ecu.edu.au. Thank you for your time.

Your Name:

Do you have children? YES NO

If so, what are their ages?

Do you have any pets? YES NO

If yes, did you buy your pet(s) for your child(ren)? YES NO

What age was/were your child(ren) when you purchased the pet(s)?

Your Contact number:

Your Email Address:

Appendix D

Letter of Consent

Please read the following statements and sign the section marked below if you agree to participate in this study.

- I have read and understood the information sheet.
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.
- I understand that the interview will be tape-recorded, and that the recording will be erased after transcription of the interview is complete.
- I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw from the process at any stage without offence being taken.
- I understand that I can refuse to answer any question and do not have to give a reason for my refusal.
- I understand that any identifying information will be erased from the finished work, that I have the right to view the finished project, and that the study may be published.

Participant's Signature_____ **Date**_____

Participant's First Name_____

Contact Number_____

Researcher's Signature_____ **Date**_____

Appendix E

Support Organisations

Centercare

Confidential Counselling Service

Ph: (08) 9325 6644

Lifeline

Confidential Counselling Service

Ph: (08) 9261 4444

Crisis Care

Confidential Counselling Service

Ph: (08) 9223 1111

Connolly Veterinary Hospital

Joondalup WA

Ph: (08) 9300 2322

RSPCA Western Australia

Malaga WA

Ph: (08) 9209 9300

Appendix F

Question Ordered Matrix (*Example Only*)

Questions > **Participant Pseudonym**	**Why did you decide to purchase or adopt a pet for your child?**	**How do you think your child views their relationship with their pet?**	**Has your child's relationship with their pet changed as they have developed?**	**What sort of regular activities does your child take part in with their pet?**
'Sandra'	She's an only child...so I thought it would sort of be like a playmate for her and also...a companion.	'Princess' (the dog) is the baby and she's the mum... she's really hers. Like her best mate really.	It's been constant...although she gets annoyed with her sometimes...	She doesn't feed her, she doesn't particularly take responsibility with her...she'll give her biscuits...but she won't clean up (after her)...
'Maria'	I always thought it was good to have pets ...to learn about death, because...it's a good way to explain to them that this is life.	The pets are seen a lot as more outside activities...a companion	Sometimes they are really fond of their animals and other times they just wish them away...which is normal.	The animals were fed regularly...they all had responsibilities and jobs...they changed over the years...
'John'	I thought it would sort of help them be a bit more responsible...	They see it as part of the family...the kids treat it like another human being...	It's waxed and waned I think...when he was a little puppy they were all over it...but when it grew older they sort of disregarded it...	'Sam' (son) does feed the dog and cat, that's his job...but reluctantly. He's not enthusiastic about it.
'Janice'	I always wanted to get pets for my children because I wasn't allowed to have pets when I was younger...	Always a member of the family...although he was predominantly Tom's (son)...he was Tom's responsibility.	The attachment Tom (son) had with Cooper (dog) was just huge...a very intense bond.	He did everything for it...he would feed her, walk her, play with her, clean up after her...he was very responsible.
'Fiona'	I've always believed pets are so important for teaching people respect for life and to actually take on something that needs to be looked after...	As part of the family...'Mark' (son) treats the dog like it's his baby...treats it like a little person!	They always allowed themselves to be close (to their pets)...they always showed that they were close to their pets	Feeding...that's about it basically!

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