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The emotional and behavioural basis of child-dog attachment and associations with psychological wellbeing

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British Psychological Association Developmental Psychology Section Annual Conference

15-17th September 2021 (Virtual)

Title: The Emotional and Behavioural Basis of Child-Dog Attachment and Associations with Psychological Wellbeing.

Objectives: Child-pet relationships have gained increasing public, scientific, and clinical attention over recent years, with research showing that the formation, nature, and consequences of such relationships can often result in positive social, emotional, and cognitive developmental outcomes for young pet owners. Child-dog attachment may be particularly pertinent, yet there remains a lack of evidence of such importance for psychological wellbeing. This study presents findings from 'The Child-Dog Bond Project' which aims to substantiate the positive benefits of child-dog attachment through examining child-dog behaviours, and potential associations between child-dog attachment and child self-reported and parent-reported child health, happiness, and wellbeing.

Methods: Data collection is ongoing. Children aged 7-13 years and their caregivers, 80% from the UK, have completed a cross-sectional online survey comprised of parent-reported and child self-reported measures of dog care practices, dog attachment, and child psychological wellbeing outcomes. A sub-sample of families provided video data of child-dog interactions at home for behavioural analysis. Data has been collected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results: Explorative pre-liminary analyses point to significant positive associations between child-dog attachment and self-reported child happiness, parent reported child general health, and point to a negative association with loneliness and social dissatisfaction. Features of the bond are observed largely through child-dog play behaviour, proximity, talking, and physical touch. The final results will be presented at the conference.

Conclusions: Childhood attachments may extend to companion animals within the home who could be promoting (or even hindering) child psychological wellbeing in ways in which we still do not fully understand.