

Adolescent Pet Companionship

Subjects: Family Studies

Contributor: Linda Charmaraman, Stephanie Cobas, Jules Weed, Quan Gu, Elizabeth Kiel, Holly Chin, Alyssa Gramajo, Megan K. Mueller

Adolescence is a prime developmental period to explore human–pet relationships, particularly given that teens are often relying less on their families, and more on other attachment figures such as peers and pets. The three main themes for perceived benefits of pets included social (e.g., reducing anxiety), physical (e.g., screen time companionship), and emotional (e.g., regulation of difficult emotions such as anger, loneliness).

Keywords: companion animals ; pets ; human–animal interaction ; adolescent development ; parent perspectives ; well-being

1. Social/Emotional Developmental Needs of Adolescents and the Role of Pets

Early adolescence is a vulnerable age with significant social-emotional challenges associated with lower self-esteem, weaker academic performance, and increased anxiety and competition with others ^[1], in addition to managing school transitions, peer relationships, and self-regulation skills ^{[2][3]}. Therefore, exploring the role of the wider family environment (including pets) in fostering teen resilience is required. As non-judgmental “family” members, pets can help adolescents fulfill two major developmental goals: to feel competent (self-efficacy) and autonomous (independence from parents). Early adolescence (aged 11–14) can include periods of social transition (e.g., school transitions, getting one’s first smartphone, signing up for social media). During this developmental period, social technologies have the potential to dominate the daily lives of adolescents, with 95% of teens aged 13–17 having access to smartphones and 45% going online constantly ^[4]. Notably, in May 2020, adolescents aged 10 to 14 spent, on average, 7.70 h per day on screens, compared to a pre-pandemic estimate of 3.8 h per day ^[5]. Strong social relationships outside of the school setting can provide a buffer for some of the social-emotional effects of these transitory periods ^[2].

2. Parent Perspectives Regarding Role of Pets

The vast majority of pet–children interaction studies to date have focused on children’s perspectives regarding attachment to their pet companions. Much less is known about parent perceptions of how the family pet will play a key role in their child’s social, emotional, and physical development, particularly in the adolescent years. Fifield and Forsyth ^[6] found that parents of children aged 8–12 most often cited teaching responsibility, the child’s desire to have a pet, and companionship for the child as the main reasons for initially acquiring a pet. In the same study, parents claimed that the primary advantage of having a pet was teaching their children to be responsible and caring. One of the rare studies of parent attitudes toward pet ownership asked 50 parents about their reasons for having pets in the family specifically for their child’s development ^[7]. Their responses included providing an unconditional playmate and listener, opportunities to develop a sense of responsibility, respect for animals, and natural observations of life processes. This is consistent with Jalongo and Ross’s ^[8] recent finding of three thematic trends in the literature on the topic of parents’ motivations to introduce dogs into the family: to please children, to provide children companions to grow up with, and to teach children responsibility. A body of research on adult pet ownership shows that pets serve as a catalyst for social interaction ^[9], and pet ownership is associated with higher levels of social capital ^[10] and physical activity ^{[11][12]}; however, this same research does not exist for adolescents who own a pet.

3. Effects of Youth–Animal Interactions on Pet Wellbeing

Very little is known about the impact that child–pet interactions, especially in families with adolescents, may have on pet well-being. However, a recent study found that pet owners perceived their pets’ well-being to be improved during lockdowns associated with COVID-19 in New Zealand ^[13]. The participants in the study cited increased human–pet interaction and interaction with social media content created by animal experts. This study suggests that perhaps higher levels of interactions with companion animals could provide some benefit for pets via companionship and enrichment.

Another recent study on the effects of COVID-19-related lockdowns in the UK found that although dogs were reported to help their owners cope with feelings of loneliness, many shared concerns about their pet's ability to cope with "alone time" and saw an increase in destructive and attention-seeking behavior ^[14]. A similar study of a US sample showed similar concerns arising: a quarter of pet owners expressed concerns about meeting their pets' social and behavioral needs, while smaller percentages of respondents faced issues of access to pet supplies and veterinary care as a result of lockdowns ^[15]. A retroactive study of pediatric dog bites during COVID-19 lockdown in an Italian city concluded that pandemic stressors on dogs, including disrupted exercise and more time spent with families, could explain the significant increase in young children being bit by family dogs, suggesting that lockdowns had negative effects on youth and pets alike ^[16]. However, the exact role of specific types of child–pet interactions on animal well-being has been significantly under-explored in the human–animal interaction (HAI) literature. Parents may be uniquely suited to observing their adolescents' interactions with their companion animals in real-life settings.

4. Developmental Systems Approach to Understanding Pets in the Family

In order to understand the nuances and complexities of youth–companion animal relationships and how they may contribute to adolescent development, a systems-based theoretical approach that allows for exploration of the integrated contexts that contribute to human–animal interaction must be considered. Relational developmental systems theories ^[17] provide a useful framework for assessing these relationships. This framework views youth development as the product of mutually influential, dynamic relationships between an individual and the many integrated layers of a youth's ecosystem ^[18]. Within this framing, youth–pet relationships do not exist in isolation; they influence and are influenced by the many other aspects of the ecosystem. Understanding how companion animals fit into this ecosystem is necessary to more fully assess the complexities and variations in how youth–pet interactions can contribute to both human and animal health and well-being. For example, pet owners often view their pets as members of the family ^{[19][20]} and can become greatly attached to them, treating them as if animals can communicate and can reciprocate in empathy ^{[19][21]}. Therefore, the way in which parents, directly and indirectly, socialize pets into the family dynamic may have a strong influence on a child's "construction" of companion animals, and can therefore mediate health outcomes associated with the child–pet relationship. Within this dynamic systems perspective on child development ^[21], children's diverse relationships (within the home, school, neighborhood, etc.) are nested within and mutually affect one another ^[22]. Parents can provide a unique perspective on how youth–pet relationships intersect with these other aspects of their child's developmental system.

5. Benefits to Adolescents

5.1. Social Benefits

Pet as a companion. Pets were described as bringing social benefits to both adolescents themselves and the family system. Most of the parents (26 out of 31) described pets as a companion for adolescents. In some cases, pets provided them with a means to show affection (without feeling "judged or awkward") and express positive emotions without feeling self-conscious around others. Maryellen spoke about how her seventh-grade daughter was able to overcome her quiet shyness when others started a conversation about her dog Bella: "It's forcing her to have a conversation back, and you know she's that bridge because if Bella wasn't there, they would say hi but then move on". John observed that his eighth-grade daughter had personality changes feeling "pretty isolated due to the [COVID-19] pandemic".

Building empathy skills. Many parents (24 out of 31) linked having a pet to adolescents developing empathy towards both animals and humans. When parents reported that their children developed empathy for other animals as a result of the relationship with their pet, it was mostly about an awareness that animals feel physical pain.

Bonding with family and friends offline. More than half (17 out of 31) of parents reflected that pets help families and friends to bond. John's daughter learned to use a shared love of pets to overcome her "uncomfortable feeling around people": "If she's out, and somebody's got a puppy, she's very excited to go play with it and pet it, and I think that's a way to connect with other people around their pets". Some parents mentioned pets serving as a connection between siblings, and an incentive for adolescents to get out of the room and spend time with family. Dee said that their dog helps her sixth-grade twin daughters to "bond with each other... because they may be twins but they're polar opposite" and again likened their bond to the pet to a familial relationship: "they're the big sisters to this little furry brother". One parent, Leah, also mentioned that pets help her "not super socially adept" sixth-grade son, James, connect with his peers: "socially it helps him because you know he has like a story to tell about the dog or a story to tell about the cat and that gives them a point of connection". Talking to others about their pets or general love of dogs helped adolescents overcome shyness and social anxiety in order to form connections with others.

Bonding through social media. Many (17 out of 31) parents reported that their adolescents post pictures of their pet(s) on social media or through online messaging services with a substantial number (9 out of 17) specifically mentioning the benefit this online sharing plays in maintaining bonds with family and friends. Rachel's ten-year-old daughter, Catherine, coped with the difficulties of online learning by finding joy in "hugging and kissing and picking up, and [making] Tik Tok videos" with their cat Hazel. The creation of pet-centric media posts also, often, catalyzed positive virtual interactions with their peers, further contributing to the adolescent's overall social and emotional well-being.

5.2. Physical Benefits

Dogs' presence in a child's life provides numerous benefits, including an anecdotal increase in physical exercise, reduced screen time, and an increased sense of safety.

Physical activity displacing screen time. A third (9 out of 31) of parents remarked how dogs served as an alternative to digital devices during free time, i.e., going on a walk with the family pet rather than watching television or playing video games.

Bonding with family during exercise. Some parents (6 out of 31) claimed exercising as a family helps with family bonding. Jennifer shares how family walks are "another opportunity to get out and have fun with the dog, as well as just a simple run outside during your school break and play some fetch". Likewise, Brenda also shares how their dog specifically allows for more time together as a family. The mother and her seventh-grade daughter would walk past the father's workplace, and he would join for the duration of the dog's walk, allowing for a moment of family togetherness during the workday that might not otherwise be taken.

Sense of physical/psychological safety. A few (3 out of 31) parents highlighted the sense of safety, both physically and psychologically, that pets bring to the household. A parent highlighted the sense of safety their child felt in hearing their dog bark, in instances of feeling physically unsafe (i.e., fear of a stalker or robbery). In that time, Jack states, "having the dogs felt important. For all of us, but you know, like anytime that [Johnathan, seventh-grade] is kind of on edge, he hears the dogs barking, he's like, [who's here], you know?" Other parents similarly cite a sense of safety with pets, even when they are physically small -- there is greater peace in leaving their children home alone. Maryellen shares about her family's dog: "he's super small [and] he won't save their lives if something really happened. But I know they feel better because he's around and they can be with him". Thus, pets' presences are reassuring to parents and children alike.

5.3. Emotional Benefits

Managing social anxiety. Some parents (8 out of 31) viewed dogs as supportive of their adolescent's abilities to learn adaptive coping mechanisms, such as to calm down during periods of increased anxiety such as during Zoom classes, while doing homework, or when adolescents are simply in an anxious state of mind. Brooke explained that her family's emotional support dog understands "when and who needs her" and helps her son eighth-grade son manage his ADHD and anxiety symptoms.

Emotional regulation/coping offline. More than half (17 out of 31) of parents described their pets as a companion for their adolescents to help with adolescents' emotional regulation such as anger, grief, and loneliness. Anthony recalls times when their dog would act as a buffer when there were heated arguments within their family.

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