

Children's Relationships with Animals.

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Current statistics indicate that many people share their lives with companion animals. This relationship between people and animals is best documented for modern Western countries and available statistics indicate that between almost half of all households (47% in the United Kingdom) and nearly three quarters (63% in Australia; 67% in the United States of America) include companion animals. Of particular relevance, the statistics indicate that companion animals are most common in households with children. This is not surprising when one considers the nature of children's relationships with companion animals. Such will be the focus of this paper.

As a social species, our need for interpersonal attachments and social relationships is strong. Feeling connected to others through the formation of social attachments is fundamental to our physical and psychological health. Indeed, so important is the need to belong that the presence of close social bonds is of more significance than the types of bonds that one has. While the majority of research demonstrating the importance of human bonds is restricted to humans' relationships with other humans, there is growing empirical evidence that the strong human tendency toward social bonds extends to non-human species, and that these bonds are associated with similar benefits to those documented with humans. Moreover, such benefits in physical and mental wellbeing extend across the lifespan and apply to children, adolescents, and adults. There is also indication that the relationships children have with companion animals are somewhat unique compared to those with adults and that the benefits provided by such relationships may be of particular significance for children's wellbeing.

Whilst the child's family environment is generally considered to be central to children's development of social competencies and valued traits including empathy and emotion regulation, the cultivation of such traits through their relationships with companion animals is being increasingly recognised. Thus, relationships with companion animals can constitute a vital part of the healthy emotional development of children. Through caring for companion animals, children learn important developmental tasks including developing a sense of responsibility and

competence in one's interactions with others, an understanding of other's feelings (i.e. empathy), and the achievement of a sense of autonomy, importance and worth. Developmental lessons can be more powerful when provided by companion animals given children's fascination of, and attraction to animals. When directed at animals, children's attention tends to be of a more sustained (as opposed to distracted) nature and consequently more likely to lead to improved behavioural control. Such focused attention may result from the fact that interactions with animals are characterised by unpredictability, fascination, wonder, and awe at animals' natural beauty and complexity. Moreover, in contrast to those with other humans, children's relationships with animals provide an opportunity for emotional investment and expression that is free of negative evaluation and criticism or rejection (otherwise referred to as unconditional positive regard).

Because non-human animals accept us unconditionally and without judgment, they provide an opportunity for emotional investment that is non-threatening, and consequently perceived to be safe, particularly by children. Indeed, such unconditional positive regard may be the key factor in the positive relationships that children have with their animal companions. Given such a predominantly accepting nature, companion animals can serve as a source of unconditional "social" support for children, often with clear advantages over human support. Other important characteristics of the child-animal bond include the devotion and loyalty that companion animals provide. Children consider their animal companions to be attentive and empathic listeners and see them as a source of solace during times of stress, loneliness or boredom.

Highlighting the powerful effect that the presence of non-human animals can have on children's social behaviour is the work of American psychologist, Boris Levinson. Levinson was having difficulty establishing even a preliminary relationship with a particularly withdrawn young boy he had been working with over some months. Although Levinson was usually accompanied by his dog Jingles at work, it was his common practice to remove the dog from his consulting room before his clients arrived. However, on one particular occasion, the boy arrived

for his appointment early and, for the first time, Levinson noticed the boy behaving quite differently, apparently quite fascinated by Levinson's dog. Consequently, in subsequent sessions with this boy, Levinson kept his dog with him. It was not long before the boy began talking to the dog and eventually to Levinson. Jingles consequently became an integral part of Levinson's work. He found that the presence of the dog enabled more rapid establishment of rapport between himself and his clients. Levinson referred to this process as *social facilitation*. Following Levinson, others have demonstrated the therapeutic role of children's interactions with animals, and *Animal-Assisted Therapy* has been adopted by increasing numbers of child workers, particularly for children with disabilities.

Thus, it seems that the benefits provided for children's wellbeing through their interactions and bonds with companion animals are best described as socio-emotional benefits. In modern times, particularly in the Western, industrialised world, a cultural way of behaving that has been referred to as individualism (a way of life in which members of a given society are motivated to pursue individual and independent success) predominates. There are concerns that increasing individualism is resulting in an erosion of collective concern, and an alarming increase in psychopathology to such an extent that living in the late 20th and 21st centuries has itself been nominated as a risk factor for the development of depression. Thus, it may be that the evolution of our culture, now dominated by economic rather than biological forces no longer provides optimal avenues for meeting our hardwired belongingness and connectedness needs. It may also be that, in such a cultural climate, companion animals can provide buffering and health promoting support for all, and most particularly for those more dependent and vulnerable members of society, our children and the elderly. Thus, whilst living in modern times is a risk factor for psychopathology, it is becoming increasingly clear that sharing our lives with companion animals constitutes a protective or buffering factor against psychopathology.

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Biographical Statement

Eleonora Gullone holds the position of Associate Professor in the School of Psychology and Psychiatry at Monash University in Australia. Her areas of expertise are developmental psychology with a focus on emotional wellbeing and human-animal interactions. She is a Fellow of the *Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics*; the *Institute for Human-Animal Connection (IHAC)* University of Denver, and of the *Australian Psychological Society*.