

The Impact of Petting and Building Relationships with Pets in Childhood on Future Personality Development

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Abstract: Relationships with pets for children are important in their stage of personality development. Interacting with pets for a long time will cause children, especially young children, to form an attachment to pets. This kind of attachment will lead to a change in children's social development. Research has shown that by using Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (LAPS) and other statistical analyses, small children are easier to form attachments, and girls are more emotionally connected with their pets than boys of all ages. Also, keeping pets is beneficial for children's development of self-concept, prosocial tendency, and daily living ability, and they would be kinder when they grow up. It is recommended for most of the families to keep pets during children's childhood, if possible. But the decision depends on the financial ability of a family, and parents' opinions—whether it is suitable for their child/children to keep pets.

Keywords: attachment to pets, personality, children

1. Introduction

Relationships are always a hot topic in people's daily life, also it is a topic that is worth social psychologists working on. Relationships can impact people's personality development, especially children. Pets, good companions to humans, are becoming important for children. More and more of pets are playing the role of the first creature outside the family to form a relationship with children. In recent years in China, the pet market are growing fast, reflecting the rapid growth of the importance of pets to human beings. Relationships with pets may impact much on children's personalities. The topic of pet attachment and its influencing factors has received a lot of attention from researchers. According to the "China Pet Consumption Report 2022", the market for urban pets (dogs and cats) in China reached 270.6 billion yuan in 2022, an 8.7% growth from 2021; The growth of dog consumption market slowed down compared with 2021, with an increase of 3.1%. The size of the cat market continued to expand steadily, increasing by 16.1% over 2021 [1].

Children have an innate attachment on the environment in which they grow up. Attachment is the emotional bond formed between infants and caregivers, and it is the means by which helpless infants obtain basic needs [2]. Psychologists had focused on children's attachment to their parents, physical growing environment and relationships with someone they grew up with. However, most people ignored the importance of companionship of pets, while pet attachment would deeply impact the shape of a child's personality and future behaviors toward animals.

Moreover, there are controversies about influences of gender on children's attachment. Research shows that gender impact how much a child attaches to his/her pet in all groups of ages, which is also a factor that worth study and discusses [3].

This article has summarized the research results of the impact of petting experiences in childhood on future personality and social functioning in recent years.

2. Pets Attachment

Daily interactions with pets will lead children, especially small children, to an attachment to their pets. This attachment is formed gradually through daily interactions. The pet becomes involved in the child's life as a companion or caregiver, and to a certain extent meets different aspects of the child's needs. The bond between children and their pets is usually so well-established before the end of the first year of life. Thus, it is possible to measure the nature and quality of the bond in early childhood.

2.1. Measurement of Pets Attachment

The most popular tool for evaluating people's emotional attachments to pets is the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (LAPS), which may be used by owners of both dogs and cats. The LAPS score can be used as a continuous variable in statistical analyses or can be categorized into groups based on predetermined cut-off scores. The scale asks children to evaluate 23 given statements in 1-4, from "non-conformity" to "totally agree" and evaluates children's attachment to pets from a score 23 (poor attachment) to 115 (full score of attachment)—higher scores indicate stronger attachment to the pet. Many studies have demonstrated that LAPS has good reliability and validity.

2.2. Gender Differences in Pet Attachment

Prior study reveals that girls have more attachment to pets in general than boys. Participants are from 24 primary school in United Kingdom and Scotland. The age distribution of the students is between 7 and 12 years old. The most popular types of pets owned by students are dogs and cats [2]. However, Professor Cheng concluded from her questionnaire research that the senior grade of primary school is still in childhood rather than adolescence. At this time, the gender difference in attachment to pets is not obvious, and girls have not yet become more sensitive and emotional than boys [4]. The contradictory findings of the above studies may explain the complexity of the mechanisms by which gender factors influence pet attachment levels. There may be unidentified mediating or moderating variables for the effect of gender on pet attachment.

3. Influences of Pets Attachment on Children

Studies also indicated that children with higher pet attachment had higher self-concept, prosociality, and competence in daily living. The researchers first divided pet attachment levels into high and low groups, and then used analysis of covariance to study the differences between the two groups in variables such as "self-concept". "Self-concept", "prosocial orientation", "activities of daily living" and "loneliness" are closely related to children's individual development. The study showed that the high-attachment group scored much higher on self-concept, prosociality and activities of daily living than the low-attachment group, with the high-attachment group scoring 10% or more higher on almost every item.

The reason may be that children with high pet attachment have more emotional connection with pets and daily interaction with pets as family members or companions, which is a good partner in life. Because of the existence of pets, they will experience more feelings of being loved and needed. Therefore, they will have a stronger sense of value, and thus their self-awareness will be more positive.

Children who are responsible for taking care of pets must be sensitive to the needs and feelings of the animals, which helps them develop excellent skills like sharing, caring for others and complying with social norms, i.e., a stronger pro-social inclination. In addition, the process of taking care of the pet is also a process for children to gradually learn daily life skills. Moreover, a good relationship with pets can better play the function of interpersonal catalyst to promote children's communication with family members, companions and even strangers. These factors are conducive to children staying away from the intrusion of loneliness.

However, children with low pet attachment have a less close relationship with pets and less interaction with a limited positive impact of pets attachment. Sometimes, there are negative effects due to the existence of pets, such as increasing the burden of care or increasing children's frustration due to parents' incorrect guidance. The above analysis is only a speculative explanation. There may also be a third factor, i.e., personality factors, attachment types, etc., that simultaneously affects the pet attachment level and social development. [5] The high attachment group was still higher than the low attachment group after excluding the effects of academic status, parents' education level and family economic status. Research on person-person attachment points out that attachment provides a sense of security and self-efficacy, enabling people to integrate confidently and smoothly into other social situations. Also, for pre-adolescent, usually refers to children aged between 10 and 12, their emotional relationships with pets were positively associated with self-concept. Vidovic and Daly's study found that participants with high attachment had significantly higher empathy and prosocial tendencies than those with low attachment [6]. Significant unadjusted differences between preschoolers from dog-owning families and non-dog-owning families were seen in the problem-solving, peer relation and prosocial behaviors [7].

It is also shown that pets can play a special role in a children's emotional development, especially with regard to self-respect, autonomy and empathy for others. Adolescents with pets are covert score higher on self-esteem scores than non-covert. Prior studies reveals that the relation between self-concept and relationship with pets is affected by age. Individuals having the first pet at age 6 to 12 score higher from the measurement of self-concept. Muldoon's study also shows that young teens have a distinct perspective on their bond with pets compared to their older counterparts. Significant unadjusted differences between preschoolers from dog-owning families and non-dog-owning families were seen in the conduct difficulties, peer problems, and prosocial behaviors sub-scales. The most significant differences were observed in the emotions of love, happiness, comfort, and companionship experienced by the younger age group. These feelings were most pronounced when pets became friends. This indicates that young teens rely on pets for emotional support and well-being during their formative years. The older teens' lower ratings may be a result of a shift in emphasis on friendship and acceptance among their peers, rather than an emphasis on dominant family relationships during earlier stages of development. Young children often consider pets as part of their family, and this shift in affection from classification to peers may likewise stretch to their friendship with pets. As a result, pets may be perceived as more closely related to the family than peers. [8] It did not say whether children had the primary responsibility for animals, but it did mention the animals they stayed within their families. Self-concept refers to a person's psychological image or perception of the self, while relationship refers to the development of attachment among close friends, parents and children. A greater social competence may appear on children who grow up with pet dogs, and they are often more developed into socially competent adults in the future, comparing to other children [9]. What's more, many studies have examined how companion animals influence children's social and emotional development, but few studies have examined its effect on cognitive development. However, several studies have indicated that the improvement of cognitive development is strongly related to the relationship between children and fellow animals [9,10].

4. Discussion

Related studies on pet attachment involved questionnaires with set numbers of reliable data sources and statistical analysis. Most of the results indicated that children with higher attachment to pets tend to show a clearer cognition of self-concept, and greater social competence. Their daily living ability are also stronger than their peers who do not have a pet in their childhood [5]. Children accompanied by pets during childhood score higher on self-respect, autonomy and empathy than others. All of those personalities, or to say, characteristics, would like to benefit children in their social activities, mental health, and they will be more respected than other peers.

A child who has learned empathy and compassion through caring for their pet may be more likely to volunteer in their community or pursue a career in a helping profession, such as social work or nursing. Responsibility and accountability learned through pet ownership may make children more likely to take on leadership roles in school or work settings, or to manage their own business or organization later in life. Also, children develop social skills through interacting with their pet and other animal lovers, and they may be more comfortable networking and making new friends in social or professional situations in the future. What's more, a child who has a positive relationship with their pet may have higher self-esteem and be more likely to pursue their goals, take risks, and speak up for themselves in academic or work settings. Finally, children with pets have learned emotional regulation through pet ownership, they may be more flexible in the face of challenges, better capable to survive stress, and less inclined experience insane fitness issues such as tension or concavity.

In order for a child's pets attachment to influence prosociality, it is necessary to help improve empathy and prosociality with a variety of environments and to support influencing children emotionally and cognitively at home, school, and in society.

However, the final decision to keep a pet needs to be well thought out, as the benefits of the action and possible problems it might bring should be balanced. People should be responsible for their pets, and their financial ability must support them to keep their pets healthy. Families with pets will have more household chores. Thus, time management will be more important for households than others. Some of the people are allergic to pet hair, and if people's health are influenced by animals, whether the household should keep petting will need to be considered.

About half of the families in western countries own pets, and most of them treat their pets as family members. Children growing up in an environment of having pets would behave more attached to their pets than others. In addition to these suggestions, it's main for youngsters to appreciate that possess a pet is a general assurance that demands love, care, and consideration. While pets can bring joy and companionship to our lives, they also require time, money, and effort. By taking these factors into consideration, children can make informed decisions about pet ownership and ensure that their pets are happy and healthy.

5. Conclusion

Pets can connect with children building close relationships and allow children to form attachment to them. During the interactions with the pets and other animal lovers or pet owners, children develop skills to social, and benefit from this learned skill in the future. Children growing up with pets are more likely to be with high self-esteem. Other advantages pets have brought to them would lead them to a healthier mental situation. Current research presents contradictory results regarding the relationship between gender and pet attachment. Future research should therefore focus on the mediating and moderating variables in the relationship. Due to these positive outcomes that pet would bring to human, it is often recommended for children to take care of a pets in their experiences in childhood. However, other factors are impacting the decision of raising pets: responsibility, financial

support, amount of housework, time cause and allergy are all affecting factors. Therefore, it is still a big decision to keep pets, and it takes a lot of effort.

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