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caar research briefing 2: April 2018

Children, adolescents, and animals research

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Children's emotional attachment to pets: the implications for vulnerable children

This briefing accompanies the second in a series of reflective workshops organised by **caar** at the University of Edinburgh and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It focuses first on findings relating to pet attachment from three of our research projects, and subsequently reflects on the implications for vulnerable children/adolescents. The theme of transitions is used as the lens through which to examine vulnerability, adopting a broad perspective. We finish by considering two groups of children/adolescents that are particularly vulnerable; looked after/accommodated children (LAAC), and those with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD).



Background

Increasingly animals are being introduced in therapeutic settings because the benefits of human-animal interaction (HAI) have been found to be most pronounced for those experiencing high levels of stress or low levels of social support (Garrity, Stallones, Marx, & Johnson, 1989; Havener et al., 2001). Similarly, recent evidence suggests that emotional attachment to pets may be particularly important for children/adolescents who have a history of adversity, family dysfunction and/or impaired attachment (Carr & Rockett, 2017; Cassels, White, Gee & Hughes, 2017). We know that secure human attachment relationships are associated with empathy and prosocial development, as well as protective against psychopathology. Insecure human attachments, by contrast, have a negative impact on mental health and behaviour (Hoeve et al., 2012). While further research is necessary, it is possible that emotional attachments to animals (pets in particular) may not only compensate to some degree for the absence of positive, secure relationships, but also facilitate the development of other relationships. Pet attachments may also be protective for the general population of children/adolescents (Rockett & Carr, 2014), especially during times of transition when relationships are often disrupted and vulnerabilities come to the fore (Muldoon, 2005). For these reasons, our research has taken a close look at attachment to different types of pet animal among children/adolescents aged 7 to 15 years.

Our studies

The studies discussed in this paper were developed within three projects, two funded by the UK Government Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) and one by the Scottish SPCA.

Project 1: Duty of Care to Animals among Children (2008-2012)

- ➔ Qualitative research with children (Focus Groups)
- ➔ Development of Short Attachment to Pets Measure (SAPS)

Project 2: Duty of Care to Animals among Adolescents (2012-2017)

- ➔ Incorporation of SAPS and pet ownership questions into the 2010 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study to examine links between pet attachment and measures of child/adolescent health

Project 3: Evaluation of the Scottish SPCA's Prevention through Education programme (2014-2017)

- ➔ Survey incorporating the SAPS and measures of compassion, prosocial behaviour, caring and friendship behaviours towards pets, attitudes towards animals, cruelty and neglect.

Research undertaken within Project 1 was used to develop questions for Project 2 and an evaluation in Project 3. HBSC is a cross-national survey of 11, 13 and 15 year-olds and is used by governments and policy makers to guide health policy (Currie et al., 2011).

Key findings

Our analyses have revealed the following:

- (a) Primary school age children are strongly attached to their pets (Hawkins, Williams & Scottish SPCA, 2017).
- (b) Attachment appears to progressively weaken with the move into the adolescent period (Muldoon et al., in press).
- (c) Strong attachments to pets are associated with better quality of life and socio-emotional well-being, as well as better communication with parents and best friends (Marsa-Sambola et al., 2016; 2017; Muldoon et al., in press).
- (d) Attachments to pet dogs do not weaken as much as bonds with other pet animals, and are more strongly associated with social and emotional wellbeing benefits (Muldoon et al., in press).
- (e) Girls consistently report stronger attachment to pets than boys, and emotional support aspects of the relationship are more salient to them (Muldoon et al. in press; under review).
- (f) Girls score higher on measures of compassion, friendship and caring behaviour towards pets, as well as positive attitudes towards animals (Hawkins, Williams & Scottish SPCA, 2017).
- (g) Attachment to pets is facilitated through caring for pets and friendship behaviours, and is negatively associated with cruelty (both intentional and unintentional) and neglect (Hawkins, Williams & Scottish SPCA, 2017).

The significance of pets during vulnerable periods

We have to navigate many transitions throughout life. They are often challenging regardless of whether they are relatively small or significantly life changing, as they involve re-evaluations of self and a 'letting go' of the past. However, transitions may carry particular significance during childhood when skills to deal with them have not been fully developed. Early adolescence is also a critical 'transitional period', when the sheer amount of change to deal with can be overwhelming (Simmons, Burgeson & Carlton-Ford, 1987). In a study of the transition from primary to secondary school, the experience of loss (particularly of key relationships) was clear among children who were struggling to cope. It was not easy to predict who would experience difficulties, and many who coped early in the transition experienced problems later, so while vulnerability can sometimes be obvious, this is not always the case (Muldoon, 2005). The presence of a stable, reliable source of support is likely to be especially important during times of change.

One explanation for the decline in attachment to pets with age (using the SAPS) may be found in the need for adolescents to resolve two relational processes: cultivating an independent *identity* that helps them develop their peer relationships, whilst maintaining their *attachment* to protective adults (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Importantly, as children are growing up, a pet may provide a stable relationship when all other relationships and expectations appear to be changing. Children's relationships with animals are not imbued with the same characteristics as those with adults (that centre on parent/guardian protection, guidance and discipline). However, pets may be more associated with the family context than peers, explaining why some distancing occurs. Future research needs to identify when, and for whom, attachments to pets are important.

The implications for looked after and accommodated (LAAC) children and those with ASD

'Securely attached children feel a consistent, responsive, and supportive relation to their mothers even during times of significant stress. Children with insecure attachment feel inconsistent, punishing, unresponsive emotions from their caregivers and feel threatened during times of stress' (Perry, 2013, p.4)

'Looked after' and accommodated children are likely to have experienced severe disruptions to their attachment relationships that subsequently impact on their emotional wellbeing and their ability to develop new relationships. Dozier et al. (2008) suggest that some maltreated children are so mistrustful of adults and resistant to support that they fail to seek care or comfort even when distressed. Therefore, it is possible that the presence of an animal, as a focus of attention, may diffuse some of the difficulties/tension inherent in a carer trying to connect with a child. However, there is also the possibility of animal cruelty if children have witnessed or experienced abuse in the past, so this can be a risk factor for foster placement breakdown (Carr & Rockett, 2017). Even more important, given the strength of attachment we have identified among primary age children, are those who have left behind a beloved pet when moving out of the family home. This pet may have been one of the few sources of responsive, reliable and consistent warmth and affection for the child (Furnival, 2011).

Key issues in relation to pet animals:

- Recognising that a child may be leaving a pet behind that means a lot to them
- A pet in the foster home may be a 'connecting point', but there are implications if the child has to move on again
- Observing caring adult behaviour modelled with an animal may help to re-build trust
- Children can identify with/view animals as an extension of self (harming an animal can be a form of self-harm)
- Child may have witnessed animal cruelty (so a new animal may bring up negative memories or may be mistreated)
- Child may enact control over an animal in the absence of control over everything else in their life

Another group of particularly vulnerable children are those with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Harris & Williams (2017) evaluated a short horse riding intervention for children aged 6 to 9 years old with ASD. This study compared a group of children engaging in the intervention with a waiting list control group of children who would participate in horse riding at the end of the study. Findings revealed a significant reduction in the severity of ASD symptoms and hyperactivity in the intervention group only, indicating improvements in social functioning as a result of participating. Children looked forward to the riding sessions and observations of them riding suggest that they were engaged and really enjoying it. Children with ASD may find animals less socially and cognitively demanding than human interactions, suggesting significant benefits of HAI. This assumption has led to increases in organisations training dogs to be assistance dogs for people with ASD (e.g., Support Dogs and Dogs for Good). Case studies reveal strong emotional bonds between children with ASD and their assistance dogs. However, it is important to closely monitor both child wellbeing and animal welfare in these situations to ensure reciprocal benefits for both the child and the dog.

What do these findings mean?

Our findings highlight the importance of a close connection to an animal rather than simply having a pet in the household. Pets may be important sources of support, particularly as children are growing up and being treated differently by those around them, and during times of change/transition. There are important implications for children who are taken away from their pets that may be usefully recognised and managed by professionals working with them. Pets within foster homes may provide a useful means by which carers and social workers build trust with children. However, we need to be mindful of a potential risk to animals among children who have witnessed animal abuse or have been mistreated or neglected themselves.

Two key areas of potential impact that are currently 'under the radar' of professional attention:

(1) Understanding children's relationships with pets

Professionals working with children experiencing socio-emotional difficulties might usefully assess the significance of pets in their lives, and identify ways of managing loss or enabling continued contact. A formal assessment/monitoring process is advised.

(2) The capacity of animals to re-build children's trust in others and develop confidence

Animals may provide children/adolescents with a rare opportunity to take on a caretaker role, when they are typically the recipients of care (Melson, 2001; Morrow, 2008). This may help children to develop a sense of autonomy and competence that helps them to feel more confident in themselves. Pets within foster homes or residential settings may also form part of the process of helping a child (a) gain a sense of belonging, and (b) develop a relationship with carers. With this in mind, professionals and carers need to reflect on how their interactions with a pet may be viewed by vulnerable children who can identify closely with animals.

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Defra and the Scottish SPCA for funding our research and our participants (children, schools, and Scottish SPCA staff) for taking part.

Contact

Please contact Dr Janine Muldoon janine.muldoon@ed.ac.uk for further information about this briefing paper or our series of reflective workshops taking place in 2018.

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