Children’s emotional attachment to pets

A reflective workshop

Friday 20th April
2018
Emotional attachment to pets & implications for vulnerable children

Part 1: Introducing caar & defining attachment to pets
  • Reflection Point 1

Part 2: Key findings from our studies
  • Reflection Point 2

Short break

Part 3: Looking at vulnerability through a ‘transitions’ lens
  • Reflection Point 3

Part 4: The implications for looked after children & those with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
  • Reflection Point 4
‘caar’ is a small research team based in the Centre for Applied Developmental Psychology (CADP), University of Edinburgh

We conduct a range of projects on all aspects of children’s interactions with animals

We work in collaboration with the Scottish SPCA and other charities

A range of funders including UK Government, charities and funding councils

Running 5 workshops this year (ESRC impact grant)
caar interests

**Welfare/5 freedoms**
- Hunger & thirst
- Discomfort
- Fear & distress
- Pain, disease & injury
- Exhibit natural behaviour

**Education**
- Pedagogical approaches
- Curriculum
- NGO activities and materials

**Child development**
- Concepts & understanding
- Attitudes
- Emotional attachments
- Empathy

**Child/adolescent health**
- Physical health
- Activity & exercise
- Mental health
- Animal-assisted interventions
Recent caar research

Children and animals

- Child development and health
- Cruelty, risks and prevention
- Animal-Assisted Interventions

- Empathy, compassion, attachment, international comparisons and mixed methods
- Psychological predictors and correlates
- School-based, digital and animal-assisted interventions
- Evaluations of AAI for ASD and child mental health
Why look at emotional attachment to pets?

- Around 70% of UK children have pets
- Viewed by children as a friend or family member
- Relationships can be stronger than those with siblings (Cassels et al., 2017)
- Emotional attachments to pets may facilitate other relationships (empathy, prosocial behaviour)
- Positive influence on health, development and wellbeing (especially for those who have experienced difficulties)

“People with histories of family dysfunction and impaired attachment have been reported to turn to their pets to satiate their need for love and support” (Rynearson, 1978, cited by Cassels et al., 2017: p. 12)
Defining ‘attachment’

‘An enduring relationship with a specific person that is characterized by soothing, comfort, pleasure, and safety. It also includes feelings of intense distress when faced with the loss, or threat of loss, of this person’ (Dobson & Perry, 2010, p.30-31)

**Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) – child-primary caregiver**

- Attunement & responsiveness of caregiver
- Internal Working Models

**Four categories of attachment (Ainsworth, 1971; Main & Solomon, 1990):**

- Secure (Secure base, safe haven, proximity maintenance & separation anxiety)
- Insecure-resistant
- Insecure-avoidant
- Insecure-disorganized/disoriented
Differences between secure & insecure attachment

‘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)

Secure attachment
- Empathy
- Prosocial behaviour development
- Protective function

Positive & loved

Insecure attachment
- Negative impact on mental health
- Linked to anxiety disorders, delinquency, animal cruelty (Hoeve et al., 2012)

Unloved, rejected, angry, confused
Is attachment to pets the same as humans?

- Mounting evidence that animals seem capable of offering features of a secure attachment relationship (Rockett & Carr, 2014)
- Quality of human-human attachment relationship not correlated with human-animal bond (i.e., people with highly insecure working models not predisposed to form similar attachments to animals)
- Pets act as another attachment figure and ‘buffer’ (security, comfort) in absence/disruption of human attachment relationships (e.g. adversity, parental divorce) (Strand, 2004)
- Animals cannot fulfil the role of an attachment figure in any complete sense (caring, protective caregiver), may be similar to sibling relationship (Carr & Rockett, 2017)
- Dogs can help children to regulate their emotions (can trigger and respond to a child’s attachment-related behaviour) – reciprocal interplay
Directionality of attachment relationship?

- Who is the caregiver & who is the recipient of care?
- Only opportunity for children to be caretakers and not just recipients (Melson, 2001; Morrow, 2008)
- The need to be needed: giving of care/love

Different to relationships with adults?

- Not imbued with the same characteristics as those with adults:
  - Facilitate development of human attachment relationships (facilitate ‘play’, & used by therapists in Animal-Assisted Therapy)
  - Pathway towards re-establishing attachment security with others (e.g. foster care) (Carr & Rockett, 2017)
Based on your own experience/observations, how would you describe the attachment/bond between children and animals?

- Is it different to adults’ attachment to pets?
- Is it different to relationships with siblings/parents?

- Share your thoughts with your group
- Remember to allow sufficient time for others
- Please take turns to make notes on the recording form
Edinburgh studies

Three funded projects:

• Duty of care towards animals among children (2008-2012)
• Duty of care towards animals among adolescents (2012-2017)

  — Qualitative research with children
  — Development of Short Attachment to Pets Scale (SAPS)
  — Incorporation of SAPS into the Scottish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study & programme evaluation
Children’s relationships with pet dogs

Siobhan: [Talking about dogs] It’s not like a cat. You can speak to them and have your own relationship with them, like them being your friend as well

Janine: They feel like that, do they, they feel like a friend?

Siobhan: Yeah

Janine: A cat doesn’t feel the same do you think?

Emily: No

Siobhan: When you say anything to it they just walk off

Emily: A dog is more of an animal who senses when you’re upset or you’re feeling down. It’ll come and comfort you

Siobhan: My dog does that, every time he sees me with my head down he comes over and licks me

Emily: They understand you

(11-year-old girls)

Muldoon, Williams & Lawrence (2016)
Discussion about liking dogs:

Louise: Because they're cute and fluffy

Keira: They're more loyal

Janine: What do you mean by that?

Keira: Because they are

Catherine: Because they're always there

Keira: Yeah, and you can talk to them more than cats...they're a bit more suspicious

(13-year-old girls)

Muldoon, Williams & Lawrence (2016)
The Short Attachment to Pets Scale (SAPS)


- Focuses on emotional and friendship aspects and strength of child-pet attachment
- Likert scale, calculate total score
- $\alpha = 0.85$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. I don't really like animals</th>
<th>(1) Strongly agree</th>
<th>(2) Agree</th>
<th>(3) Not sure</th>
<th>(4) Disagree</th>
<th>(5) Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B. I spend time every day playing with my pet (or would if I had one)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. I have sometimes talked to my pet and understood what it was trying to tell me (or would if I had one)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. I love pets</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. I talk to my pet quite a lot (or would if I had one)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. My pet makes me feel happy (or would if I had one)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. I consider my pet to be a friend (or would if I had one)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. My pet knows when I am upset and tries to comfort me (or would if I had one)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. There are times I'd be lonely without my pet (or would if I had one)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Patterns of attachment

## Benefits of strong attachment to a pet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Dog/s</th>
<th>Small mammal/s</th>
<th>Cat/s</th>
<th>Fish/reptile/amphibian/s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidscreen mental health index</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Health Questionnaire</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness (frequency)</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness (extent)</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived health</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling left out</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling lonely</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of communication (father)</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of communication (mother)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attachment & child-animal interactions

RESULTS: Levels of attachment

Children are highly attached to their pets (69% above mean)

Pets are important in children’s lives and social networks:

- 80% loved pets
- 83% pet made them happy
- 76% pet was their friend
- 62% lonely without their pet
- 52% felt that their pet knew when they were upset and it tried to comfort them
RESULTS: Associations focused

- Caring behaviour
- Friendship behaviour
- Attachment to pets
- Beliefs about animal minds
- Compassion
- Attitudes towards animals
- Unintentional animal cruelty
- Intentional animal cruelty
- Animal neglect
RESULTS: Demographics

- **Girls** scored higher on:
  - Attachment ($d=0.3$)
  - Compassion ($d=0.2$)
  - Friendship ($d=0.4$), caring behaviour ($d=0.2$)
  - Positive attitudes ($d=0.2$)

- No difference between younger and older children

- **Older children** scored higher on caring behaviour ($d=0.2$)

- No impact of family affluence on attachment to pets
RESULTS: Pet ownership

Children with their own pet = higher
- Close relationship and emotional bond = more important than presence of pet
- Increased direct involvement and responsibility for care

Dogs and cats only significant predictors of child-pet attachment
- More emotionally expressive

More likely to form attachment to dogs
- Dogs as attachment figures
- More direct contact
- Read and adapt behaviour in response to human emotional signals
Pet attachment linked to **compassion** and **humane behaviour** (positive child-pet relationships)

**Caring for pets** (spending time with, cuddling, stroking, and playing)

**Friendship behaviour towards pets** (telling secrets to, crying with when sad, talking to)

= **Facilitators of attachment to pets**

May need direct contact/experience with animals to develop attachment

**Animal cruelty and neglect** may be associated with a lack of emotional attachment to pets

**Pet care roles at home may foster children’s attachment to pets:**
- Positive outcomes for child (improved well-being and quality of life)
- Positive outcomes for animal (better care and welfare)
Have you ever felt that an attachment to an animal is, or could be, ‘unhealthy’, either for the child or animal, or both?

- If so, what made you feel this way and did you intervene?
- Please discuss your observations & possible reasons behind the relationship being sub-optimal/potentially harmful
  - Share your observations/experiences with your group
  - Remember to protect the identity of the people you are talking about
  - Allow sufficient time for others
  - Please take turns to make notes on the recording form
All transitions (whatever stage of life) are challenging (potential for growth or a setback)

• Can be a major ‘turning point’
• Vulnerabilities can come to the fore

Characterised by:

• Eager anticipation for the future
• Anxiety in relation to the future
• Ambiguity in status
• Psychological reorganisation (re-evaluation of self)
• Regret at what has been lost

Coleman (1999)
What makes this period vulnerable?

- Multiple transitions; puberty, between childhood and adolescence, change of schools, everyday
- Multi-dimensional nature (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008) of transitions can be overwhelming
- Two relational processes to resolve:
  - Identity
  - Attachment
- Heightened self-consciousness & low self-disclosure (boys in particular)
- Need to be somebody and have significance & autonomy, but also stronger need for security
Looked at children’s feelings about how they were coping

Children who struggle describe the loss of:

- personal/social identity (and therefore friendships)
- childhood
- personal & positive relationships with teachers

**Relationships key**

- Not fitting in/included
- Not feeling known/understood/cared for
- Not sharing problems, coping alone
- Quieter, not as confident vs. fighting back

➢ Vulnerability not always obvious or predictable

Changes in social support from different sources (Time 1 - 2)

- **Peers**: 3.31 – 3.26
  - Teenage behaviour / risk-taking
  - Older pupils
  - ‘Childish’ behaviours vilified

- **Teachers**: 3.42 – 3.18
  - Greater distance
  - Unapproachable
  - Not allowed to talk to them
  - Can’t ask for help

- **Friends**: 3.58 – 3.41
  - Need them to ‘survive’ HS
  - Identity concerns move people away from existing friends

- **Parents**: 3.78 – 3.69
  - Retreat from involvement in school life
  - ‘Done my time’

"Ebbing away of support" (Muldoon, 2005)
Relationship with a pet may be the only stable relationship

- Pets may help during transition
- Relationship does not alter as the child grows up (expectations/behaviours of others change)
- Accepts/understands the child as she/he is
- A ‘retreat’, someone to talk to without repercussion

However:

- Pets may be associated more with the family than the peer group, distancing may occur as children move into adolescence
- Child’s view/outward expression about relationship with the pet may change with awareness of the need to show increasing maturity/independence
Have you observed a child/children going through a difficult transition/s?

(1) What do you think helps to improve a difficult transition?
(2) What makes transition/s more difficult? (i.e. What hinders a successful transition?)
(3) Are you aware of a pet/animal having helped to ease a child’s transition, or, alternatively, complicated the process?

– Share a case study with your group
– Remember to allow sufficient time for others
– Please take turns to make notes on the recording form
The implications for vulnerable children
Findings from the Toddlers’ Up project

• 10-year longitudinal study of social and emotional development led by Professor Claire Hughes, Centre for Family Research, University of Cambridge

• Adversity (bereavement, divorce, instability, illness) or a disadvantaged background = stronger relationship with pets than peers

• More academic/mental health problems, but stronger relationships with pets scored higher on prosocial behaviour (helping, sharing, co-operating)

• These children, particularly girls and those whose pet was a dog, were more likely to confide in their pets than in their siblings

“In the US and England pets are more common in families with young children than resident fathers and yet we don’t quantify how important they are to us” (Matt Cassels, University of Cambridge website: research news, 7th May 2015)

'Early developmental experiences with caregivers - the infant's first exposure to humans - create a set of associations and "templates" for the child's brain about what humans are. Are humans safe, predictable? Are they a source of sustenance, comfort, and pleasure? Or are they unpredictable and a source of fear, chaos, pain, and loss?' (Perry, 2009, p.247)

‘In a child who has experienced chronic threats, the result is a brain that exists in a persisting state of fear’ (Perry & Hambrick, 2008 p.40)

Children in transition from one home to another may:

- have left a beloved pet behind (Furnival, 2011)
  - Should the child continue to see the animal? Is this possible?
  - Awareness/recognition of this loss is important

- have a working model of relationships that may interfere with/prevent the development of new, trusting relationships (Dozier et al., 2008)
  - Can animals/pets ‘diffuse’ some of the tensions?
  - An inroad to developing a new working model? (the adult modelling trusting, caring relationships)
  - Does caring for a pet together build relationships (shared activity)?
  - Pet as ‘transitional’ object

- have witnessed cruelty to animals or inflicted harm themselves
  - Does this pose a threat to a foster family that has a pet/s? How should this be dealt with?
  - Should a child be matched appropriately with respect to pets in a household?

Judith Furnival (2011) Attachment-informed practice with looked after children and young people (Iriss)
The implications for vulnerable children: LAAC

- ‘Looked after’ children highly at risk of insecure human attachments:
  - Residential care,
  - kinship care,
  - foster care,
  - looked after at home,
  - adopted
  - leaving care

- In England in 2017 72,670 children were ‘looked after’ and adopted

- What impact will change in pets and pet attachment have on their development?
The implications for vulnerable children: LAAC

Recent study Carr & Rockett (2017) followed 8 children aged 10 to 16 years in foster care. Children interviewed twice with a 6 month interval

Results revealed:

- 88% of cases animals acted as a safe haven
- 66% of cases animals acted as a secure base
- 88% of cases animals enhanced relations with foster carers
- 75% of cases animals acted as bridge to foster carers
- Animals increase sense of safety and security in foster care
The implications for vulnerable children: LAAC

Carr & Rockett (2017)

**Safe Haven:** I like spending time with him [the dog] and I used to hide in the living room with him when there was a knock at the door. I used to worry it was the social worker coming to take me away. I didn’t feel safe without him and when I was with him, just holding his ears, I felt relaxed and I wouldn’t have the big thumping in my body (Evan).

**Secure base:** I was worried because he wasn’t in the house. He usually sleeps beside my door and I didn’t like sleeping in a strange place and not having him there too. I was worried because he wasn’t in the same place as me when I went to sleep (Jane)

However, animal cruelty can be a risk factor for foster placement breakdown – we need to consider both sides of the attachment relationship.
Considerations with respect to LAAC

What do we need to bear in mind?

- Extent of transition the child/adolescent is going through
- Timing crucial; supporting multiple & multi-dimensional transitions
- Recognition of what is lost from the child’s perspective

In relation to pets:

- 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 what happens if attachment develops and the child has to move on?)
- Child can see adult behaviour modelled, so may build trust
- Child can identify with an animal – extension of self (self-harm, harming animal)
- Child may have witnessed animal cruelty (past associations/may also mistreat a pet)
- Child may enact control over an animal in the absence of control over everything else in their life
The implications for vulnerable children: ASD

Children with ASD typically show difficulties in:

- communication
- social relationships
- repetitive and restricted patterns of behaviour
- The condition is early emerging and lifelong

- Social/emotional and communicative difficulties can pose challenges for human attachments and relationships
- Attachment to animals may be less socially, emotionally and communicatively demanding
- Evidence of improvements in social functioning following animal assisted interventions (e.g. Harris & Williams, 2017)
- Prof. Temple Grandin ‘The woman who thinks like a cow’ – animal behaviour expert with ASD
- Case studies of children with ASD show strong emotional bond with pets
The implications for vulnerable children: ASD

Autism assistance dogs:
https://supportdogs.org.uk/about-us/stories/?story-category=autism-assistance

Jacob, Minta and Mum Susan’s Story:
Susan tells us “Jacob was a very lonely little boy who had no friends. It was horrible to see how isolated and lonely he was. For the family it was difficult because everyday life would cause him great stress and he became distraught even going to the shops. This meant my life had to be regimented to reduce this stress as much as possible.”

“When Minta entered our family our lives were changed and the change in Jacob was phenomenal. Firstly, there was the difference she made in everyday life. Now when we need to go to the shops or want to go on a family day out we tell Jacob that Minta wants to go and he doesn’t become stressed. Even when Minta is not around, knowing she is close by keeps Jacob happy and calm.”

“Every Jacob needs a Minta. They are best friends”
The implications for vulnerable children: ASD

However, might ASD pose risks for animal welfare?

• Difficulties with emotion processing might mean children with ASD fail to recognise fear and pain in animals?

• Repetitive behaviours an animal does not like?

• Are particular types of animals, even breeds of dogs, more suited to children with ASD?
Reflecting on the findings on ASD, please discuss this case:

A child with ASD is very bonded with their cat but has severely injured it through a deliberate act. Observing their behaviour, the child is still very interactive with the cat and the cat shows no signs of fear.

- Was the deliberate act intentional cruelty?
- Should the cat be removed from the family?
- How should the situation be managed?
Upcoming workshops

**Workshop 3: Friday 8th June**
Cruelty to animals: What does it mean and who is ‘at risk’?

**Workshop 4: Monday 3rd September**
Animal welfare education: What interventions work and for whom?
Part of the Scottish SPCA’s conference

**Workshop 5: Friday 5th October**
Animal-assisted interventions: From evidence to practice and from practice to evidence
Thank you for coming!

Janine.muldoon@ed.ac.uk
Jo.williams@ed.ac.uk
https://www.ed.ac.uk/health/research/cadp/child-animal-research

@ChildAnimals