**caar practitioner report 1: 2018**

**Children, adolescents and animals research**

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*What effect do pets have on children’s development and health?*

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This report accompanies the first reflective workshop organised by **caar** at the University of Edinburgh and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It highlights key considerations for practitioners based on our own reflections and those of workshop participants. For the research findings underpinning this report, please see research briefing 1.

*Workshop resources:*

[**https://www.ed.ac.uk/health/research/centres/cadp/child-animal-research/events/2018-workshops/workshop-1**](https://www.ed.ac.uk/health/research/centres/cadp/child-animal-research/events/2018-workshops/workshop-1)

**Key considerations for practitioners working with children and/or animals**

These considerations relate to two core aspects of practice: (1) recognising the significance of pets in the lives of individual children, and (2) incorporating experiences with animals into therapeutic or educational work.

***Recognising the significance of pets***

* Many children have a very strong attachment to their pet animal and this strong attachment often has a positive influence on their social and emotional wellbeing. Adults seeking to understand children so as to better support them within school, healthcare, or community settings, might usefully discuss pets with them or their family. This is particularly important for those trying to assess the sources of support and relationships available to the child.
* Girls’ and boys’ relationships with their pets may vary; boys perhaps reluctant to talk about their pets in an emotional way and focusing more on play and activities rather than the emotional support they receive. This does not mean that pets are less important to boys. Girls are more likely to refer to how the pet provides them with emotional support. However, this may represent a very different kind of support than they receive from humans.
* The strength and nature of attachment varies depending on the type of pet. Children appear to have a far stronger relationship with dogs. A dog may be akin to a friend or sibling and relationships with the dog may actually be stronger than those with siblings. Relationships with dogs are more likely to remain important as children move into adolescence than other types of pet.

***Incorporating experiences with animals into practice***

* Those working with children might consider how they could incorporate interactions with animals into their own work, remaining mindful that they must be informed and seek guidance from reputable and trusted sources about the best ways to do this.
* It is important to recognise that not all children either connect with an animal, or benefit from their interactions with animals. Children with animal-related phobias or allergies may find interactions challenging.
* There are children who have observed animal abuse or cruelty or are abused or neglected themselves. These children may pose a risk to animals.

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