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**caar practitioner report 2: 2018**

**Children, adolescents, and animals research**

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

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This report accompanies the second reflective workshops 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 reflections and those of participants. For the research findings underpinning this report, please see research briefing 2.

*Workshop resources:*

[**https://www.ed.ac.uk/health/research/centres/cadp/child-animal-research/events/2018-workshops/workshop-2**](https://www.ed.ac.uk/health/research/centres/cadp/child-animal-research/events/2018-workshops/workshop-2)

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

These considerations relate to two core aspects of practice: (1) recognising that pets may be important sources of support for children, especially during times of vulnerability or transition, and (2) using animals as a vehicle for re-connecting children who have experienced severe disruption to attachment relationships. These areas are ‘under the radar’ of professional attention.

***Understanding children & young people’s relationships with pets***

* A pet may provide a stable relationship when all other relationships are changing. Children’s relationships with animals are not imbued with the same characteristics as those with adults (parent/guardian protection, guidance and discipline).
* Children may be closer to a pet than to other family members, including siblings.
* A pet may be easier to understand/relate to for some vulnerable children (e.g., Autistic Spectrum Disorder/trauma).
* 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 and attachments.

***The capacity of animals to re-build children’s trust in others and develop confidence***

* Animals can provide children/adolescents with a caretaker role that may help to develop a sense of autonomy, competence and confidence.
* Pets within foster homes or residential settings may form part of the process of helping a child (a) gain a sense of belonging, and (b) develop a relationship with carers. Observing caring adult behaviour modelled with an animal may help to re-build trust. However, there are implications if the child has to move on again.
* Professionals/carers might usefully reflect on how their own interactions with a pet may be viewed by vulnerable children who can identify closely with animals and may use their observations as a barometer when assessing how they think they will be treated by the adult.
* Children who have witnessed animal abuse or have been mistreated or neglected themselves may pose a risk to animals. They may enact control over an animal in the absence of control over everything else in their life, or they may mistreat the animal in the context of emotional release. A new animal may also bring up distressing memories.

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