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## Children, adolescents, and animals research

**Dr Janine C Muldoon**

**Professor Joanne M Williams**

### *Children's relationships with different types of companion animal*

This briefing accompanies the fifth in a series of reflective workshops organised by **caar** at the University of Edinburgh). It focuses on key findings from our research projects relating to pet attachment in children/adolescents aged 7 to 15 years, and examines some of the traumatic aspects of pet ownership and attachment. We consider both the personal experience of bereavement and loss of a pet animal and the implications for families who purchase animals whose welfare has often been compromised early in life.



### **Background**

In our second workshop (caar research briefing 2), we focused in on children's emotional attachments to pets, examining the implications of such attachments for vulnerable children (Rockett & Carr, 2014), or during challenging periods of life when there is significant change in human relationships (Muldoon, 2005). We highlighted recent evidence suggesting that emotional attachment to pets may be particularly important for those with a history of adversity, family dysfunction and/or impaired attachment to primary caregivers. This briefing continues to look at relationships in a broader sense, considering whether the extent and nature of children's attachment to pets is different depending on the type of animal involved (presented by Dr Janine Muldoon). It also delves deeper into the experience of losing a pet and the bereavement process (presented by Lesley Winton of Fostering Compassion). Finally, as more and more people are purchasing pets, particularly dogs, online, often from unregulated websites, we highlight our findings on the effects on dog behaviour of being raised on an illegal puppy farm (presented by Gilly Mendes Ferreira, Scottish SPCA). Taking into account the strength of the bonds children develop with their pets, we consider what this means for them and their families.

### **Our studies**

The studies discussed in this paper were developed within four projects, two funded by the UK Government Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra). Projects 3 and 4 were carried out in collaboration with 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 (a multi-national World Health Organisation Collaborative study, Currie et al., 2011). This enabled examination of the possible links between pet attachment and child/adolescent wellbeing.

#### *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.

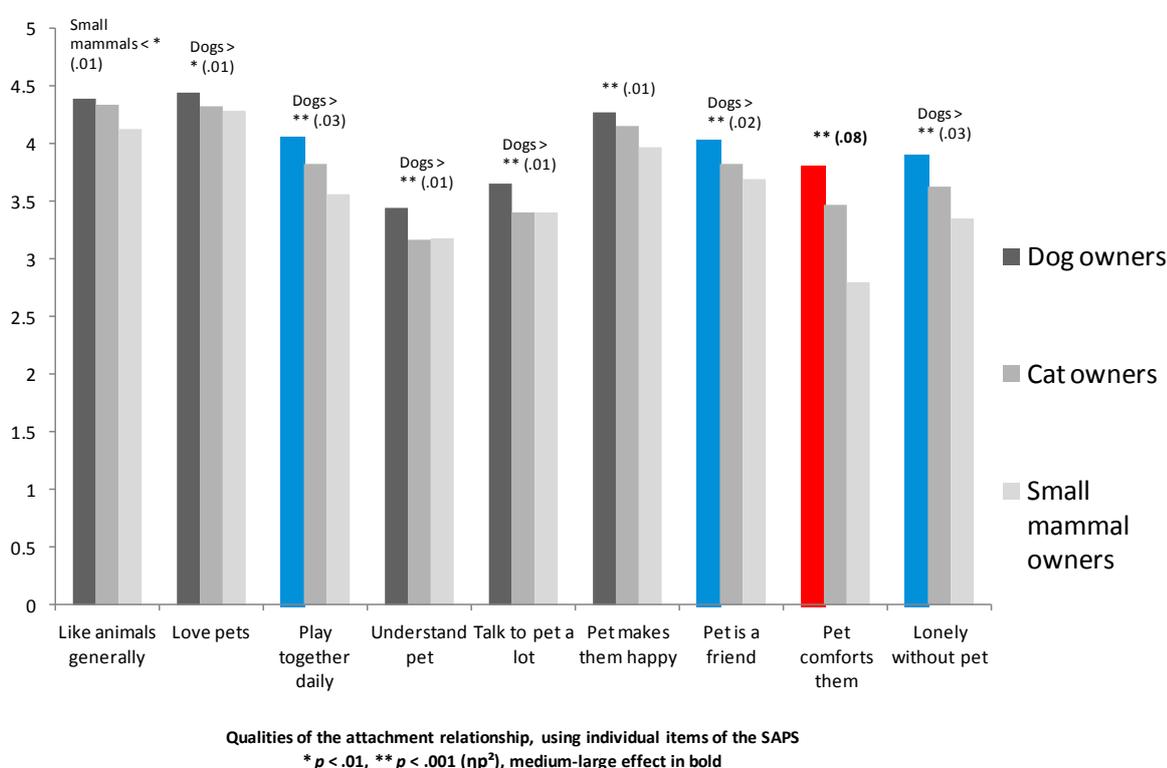
## Project 4: Investigating the effects of the illegal puppy trade (2016-2017)

- ➔ Survey examining the effects of intensive dog breeding regimens, also known as 'puppy farming', on the behaviour of dogs as reported by their owners.

### Children's relationships with different types of pet

Our research has shown that girls report stronger attachments to their pets than boys, though this is a small effect. Larger effects are found in relation to the strength of attachment to different types of pet (children reporting stronger attachment to dogs), and as a result of age. As children move into adolescence, the strength of attachment appears to diminish. There are significant differences between 11, 13 and 15-year-olds. However, attachment to pet dogs does not weaken as much as bonds with other pet animals, and are more strongly associated with social and emotional wellbeing benefits (Muldoon, Williams, Lawrence & Currie, 2019). Figure 1 highlights the particular aspects of attachment that make relationships with dogs distinctive (see blue and red columns). Those with dogs are more likely to report playing with them daily, their pet being a friend, and feeling lonely without them. Most striking is the finding that those with dogs are more likely than those with cats or small mammals to feel their pet provides comfort. Those with cats also score higher on this aspect of attachment than those with small mammals, supporting the notion that stronger bonds are more likely to develop with dogs and cats (Hawkins, Williams, & Scottish SPCA, 2017).

**Figure 1: Differences in components of attachment according to pet type**



Muldoon, Williams, & Currie (2019)

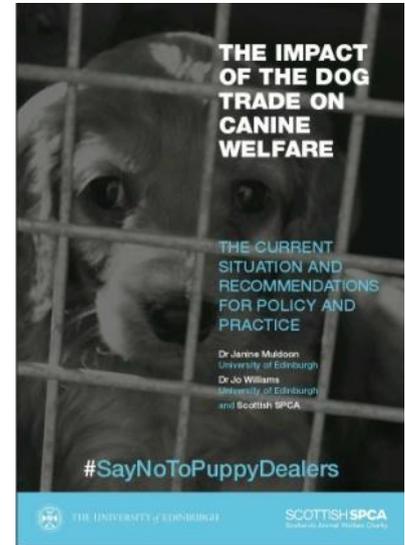
### The experience of bereavement and loss

Given the strength of attachment we have identified among primary age children, we have drawn attention to those who have to leave behind a beloved pet when moving out of the family home (Muldoon & Williams, 2018). This pet may have been one of the few sources of responsive, reliable and consistent warmth and affection for the child (Furnival, 2011), so this loss may be potently felt. When loss is experienced as a result of the death of a pet, adults typically report that this elicits the same kinds of feelings as losing a human family member (Kemp, Jacobs & Stewart, 2016). These include shock, hurt, sadness, loss, numbness, emptiness, feeling lost, and losing a part of the self. However, whilst there is a process of publically ritualizing grief and supporting the bereaved where human death is concerned, this is not the case for those who have lost a special animal (Chur-Hansen et al. 2011). The bereaved have to find ways of coping with the loss themselves. This may be particularly difficult for children who have never

experienced this before and for those who were highly bonded to a pet and so experience more intense grief (Brown, Richards & Wilson, 2009). Importantly, it has been suggested that because animals are often embedded within family emotional systems, the loss of an animal can have a ripple effect through the network of other relationships in the family (Walsh, 2009). In a similar vein, the experience of grief surrounding the loss of an animal can often be compounded by other losses (Kemp, Jacobs & Stewart, 2016). Russell (2017) describes how children often anticipate the loss of certain types of animal. There is an expectation with, say, hamsters, that they don't live long, but this is unlikely to extend to other types of animal who may have become a stable and consistent attachment resource for a child as they have grown up.

## Sourcing pets and the implications of the illegal puppy trade

Our research on the impact of the illegal puppy trade on dog health and behaviour revealed that puppy trade dogs are more likely to experience ill health and behavioural problems associated with fear and aggression (Wauthier, Williams, & Scottish SPCA, 2018). The animal welfare concerns raised by this work have led to the #SayNoToPuppyDealers campaign and the Scottish Government campaign to inform the public of the dangers of buying puppies from the internet. There are also associated human emotional and financial costs. The initial cost of a pet can be very high. Some puppies are bought for thousands of pounds. Additionally, pets may become ill, entailing the involvement of expensive veterinary treatment. Many young animals sold on the internet have not been vaccinated against common viral infections. Thus, puppies are vulnerable to serious infections such as canine parvovirus, which can be fatal.



The emotional costs to families of buying a puppy trade dog from the internet, or another pet that may have prior health or behavioural problems, can be significant. Pets are often bought for children who become highly attached to them quickly. If the pet becomes ill or dies, the family will experience not only financial loss but also bereavement, and this can be highly traumatic for children. Furthermore, if the pet exhibits behavioural difficulties that are not disclosed to the buyer, this can be a risk for family members. For example, fearful and aggressive dogs are a risk for dog bites. There have been three tragic cases of fatal dog attacks on children in the UK recently. Challenging pet behaviour is often a reason for relinquishing pets to rehoming centres, creating a cycle of difficult experiences for the animals, with increasingly negative effects on their welfare. This often intensifies their challenging behaviour, making them even more difficult to rehome.

## What do these findings mean?

We know that children often view their pets, particularly dogs, as important sources of support. Therefore, there are a number of issues that require careful thought if we are to support children and families effectively, as well as ensure animal welfare is safeguarded.

### (1) Understanding what is distinctive about relationships with different types of animal

The quality of the relationships that children form with different types of pets varies and this has an impact on children's wellbeing. This has important implications for children's mental health as well as pet welfare, and suggests that animal-assisted interventions for children should consider carefully the type of animal used in practice in order to maximise therapeutic benefits.

### (2) Helping children deal with grief when a pet dies or they are separated

Losing a pet or a pet becoming ill can be an emotional and sometimes traumatic experience for a child, especially when they have a strong emotional attachment to the pet. Parents, teachers and other professionals working with children should be mindful that children may experience a grieving process and psychological distress following the loss of a pet.

### (3) Helping the public to choose a pet whose welfare has not been compromised

The Scottish SPCA, the RSPCA, Dogs Trust, Cats Protection League and many other welfare organisations across the UK offer rescue and rehoming services that involve checking animals' health and behaviour prior to rehoming. They also consider the appropriateness of a pet for the family, and offer advice and support on pet care. If families prefer to buy a puppy from a breeder, The Kennel Club and Scottish SPCA Assured Puppy Breeder Scheme also offer contacts for reputable breeders. The [#SayNoToPuppyDealers](#) website and Scottish Government campaign also offer advice on purchasing puppies from the community. The following websites are useful: [www.buyapuppysafely.org](http://www.buyapuppysafely.org) and [www.puppycontract.org.uk](http://www.puppycontract.org.uk).

Giving children the opportunity to grow up with a pet, to care for it and gain comfort from it, can be an incredibly important part of childhood. Interacting with animals has a range of health and psychological benefits for children. However, we need to ensure that we minimise preventable risks of emotional loss and bereavement, and prioritise the welfare of animals when buying a pet.

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## Contact

Please contact Dr Janine Muldoon [janine.muldoon@ed.ac.uk](mailto:janine.muldoon@ed.ac.uk) for further information about this briefing paper or our series of reflective workshops.

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