



# Research summary

Janine Muldoon & Jo Williams, November 2022

## AIM OF THE STUDY

To explore the significance of pets for children and young people with care experience and examine the impact of disruptions to those relationships when moving into or between care settings.

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

An online UK-wide survey with children and young people with care experience, and interviews with care leavers.

Questions assessed:

- Demographics (age, gender, area of residence, time in care, number of homes),
- Relationships with pets past and present (ownership, attachment and loss, experiences of pet care and observations of pet treatment),
- Pet ownership in the future,
- Wellbeing (attachment style, self-esteem and quality of life).

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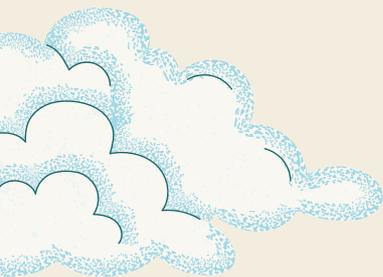
survey participants  
14 female, 10 male  
(age 15-24 years)

12

living in England, 10 in  
Scotland, 1 in Wales &  
Northern Ireland

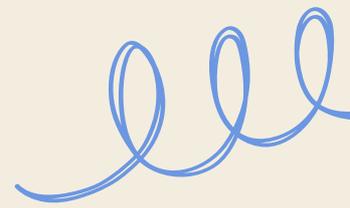
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female care leavers  
living in Scotland took  
part in an interview  
(age 21-25 years)



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# Key findings



## KEY MESSAGES FROM BOTH THE SURVEY & INTERVIEWS

There were consistent findings from the survey and interview with respect to:

- The impact of having a pet during childhood, especially when experiencing difficult relationships in the family (mental health benefits and attachment figure, the only secure base for some).
- The emotional impact of losing a special animal.
- The significance of dogs as opposed to other types of pet.

## SURVEY DATA

The survey findings also revealed the following:

- Securely attached individuals had higher self-esteem and better quality of life than those who had insecure (ambivalent or avoidant) attachment styles.
- Regardless of gender or attachment style, attachment to a pet that had been important to them was extremely strong.

50%

had lost a connection  
with a pet

45%

reported that someone  
had harmed a pet they  
had known or they  
preferred not to say

95%

said they would like a  
pet in the future

- Half the sample had lost a connection with a pet and the impact of this was keenly felt. Although statistical analysis of differences was not possible, the figures suggest that future studies should assess whether females and those with insecure attachment styles are more likely to experience a greater impact of pet loss.
- Almost half the sample appeared to have observed animal maltreatment or neglect.
- Almost all participants wanted a pet in the future (the majority a dog) and felt really confident in their ability to look after them well.
- The impact of losing a pet was associated with lower self-esteem/quality of life. Due to adverse early life experiences/insecure attachments, children are likely to have both poorer mental health and perhaps a stronger relationship with a pet than is typical in the wider population. Therefore, the impact of losing them is inevitably far greater.



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# Findings from the interviews



The interview findings provided an in-depth understanding of the young women's relationships with pets and their views on issues affecting children in care. These are summarised below.

## WHY PETS MATTER

- Mental health support (physical and emotional), companionship/prevents loneliness, social facilitation, non-judgmental/good listeners, physical exercise/engagement with outside world, routine, need to nurture/receive unconditional love, can't let the animal down.
- Pets can provide a secure base for children growing up in dysfunctional families.
- Relationships with pets may be stronger than those with other family members.
- Pets can support the transition to independent living and care leavers' mental health.

## WHY LOSS MATTERS

- Loss of a pet can be incredibly traumatic, as a result of the type of support afforded by pets and the context surrounding loss.
- Relationships with pets are embedded within, and shaped by, families in crisis. Therefore, loss is also likely to take place alongside other relational difficulties or ambiguity.
- Because the loss of a pet is not viewed in the same terms as loss of a person, the experience can be one of 'quiet suffering' or disenfranchised grief.
- The experience of loss is likely to be 'complicated' when the pet has assumed centrality in someone's life.
- Losing a connection with a pet is often tied up with a sense of bewilderment linked to a lack of trust, acknowledgment or understanding from adults surrounding them.

## WAYS IN WHICH CONNECTIONS WITH PETS ARE LOST

- moving into care, out of the family home where the pet is living
- moving from one care setting to another where you cannot take your pet with you
- moving out of a care setting where a relationship has developed with the pet that lived there
- pet death
- parent/carer rehoming the pet
- pet disappearance



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## PETS AND THE MANAGEMENT OF CARE TRANSITIONS

- In spite of their significance to children, pets did not feature in discussions and processes associated with managing care transitions.
- Adults and constraints in care setting dictated what happened to pets.
- Children were neither consulted nor supported but left to cope on their own.

"I worked in a residential foster care facility and one of the things that we had happen a lot with our older kids is they'd mention how they missed their cat or their dog or their bunny rabbit that was at home and, you know, there were certain plans in place so they could visit their birth parents, they could visit their siblings, their boyfriends, their girlfriends, their babies, but there wasn't any plans in place for them to visit their animals. As someone who was in care, myself and also who likes animals, I know how it feels to be like 'I can't see my dog and it's my dog', you know" (Amy)

## WHY INTERACTIONS WITH ANIMALS MAY BENEFIT THOSE IN RESIDENTIAL/FOSTER CARE SETTINGS

- Those in care miss pets they had to leave behind.
- Their presence lightens the atmosphere/fun, positive interactions.
- Children in care have the right to experience the same as those not in care.
- Animals are a special kind of support for those with complex needs.
- Animals can be a vehicle for the development of empathy and connections with others.

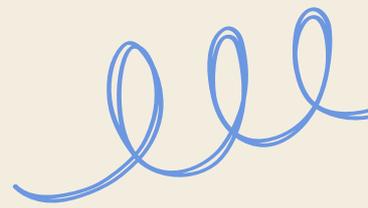


"Well I was never actually in a proper children's home- like a unit kind of thing- but I know there is lots of people that are, and I'm sure that quite a few of them don't allow pets, which - I think that actually needs to change, because they deserve pets just as much as someone that has a family or is living with their family does ..... it would give them something to focus on, and probably keep them out of trouble as well. So I think that that kind of needs to change, and I know that that's not going to happen anytime soon, but if enough people start talking about that, then eventually they might listen" (Caitlin)

Importantly, our participants were not just sharing their own experiences, but acting as advocates for both children in care *and* animals.



# Recommendations



To ensure the care system does not inadvertently foster a perpetual loop of mistrust and relational losses for those with care experience, the following are recommended:

- Attention to pets, as a major (sometimes sole) source of support in the family, should be an integral part of the process of managing care transitions.
- Ways to maintain a relationship with an important pet should be explored, not ignored.
- It is imperative that the impact of pet loss is understood in its own right and against the backdrop of disruption in other attachments.
- Support needs to be in place to help children deal with loss and address their concerns about pets' welfare.
- Ways of incorporating meaningful interactions with animals in care settings should be investigated. Our participants highlighted constraints on their inclusion (children's allergies, paperwork, liability issues). However, the Care Inspectorate resource 'Animal Magic' (2018) provides examples of how organisations have managed this process, and the Animals and People Together (APT) Project (Scottish SPCA, 2022) aims to provide support for those wishing to do so.
- Given many young people moving out of care are likely to get a pet and may be struggling with their mental health, it is vital that support is in place to help them identify the right pet and understand how to establish relationships that are positive for both parties. Moreover, it is imperative that pets are not seen as a replacement for involvement with a significant adult through and beyond the transition.

Project webpage  
[bit.ly/Petsandchange](https://bit.ly/Petsandchange)



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Thank you to our  
participants, partners and  
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*support*

## Our partners

Staf (Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum)  
The Care Inspectorate  
Fostering Compassion  
The Scottish SPCA

Please get in touch if  
you are interested in  
contributing to our  
research in the future

## Funder

The Society for Companion  
Animal Studies (SCAS)

 [janine.muldoon@ed.ac.uk](mailto:janine.muldoon@ed.ac.uk)

 [Children, Adolescents & Animals  
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