

Study shows how children relate to their pets

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In a study of more than 1,000 school children, scientists at the University of Liverpool have shown that the bond between a child and their pet is a significant part of growing up in families from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds.

Little is known about the social and [cultural differences](#) in how [children](#) relate to family pets. Research at Liverpool, in collaboration with MARS Petcare and the WALTHAM Centre for Pet Nutrition, Liverpool John Moores University and Liverpool City Council, investigated the factors

that influenced this relationship, such as gender and if the child had siblings.

The research looked at the ownership of a range of pets, including dogs, cats, rabbits, rodents, horses and fish. The study showed that more than half of children considered their dog to be their 'favourite' pet, followed by cats. Girls were more likely to own most pet types, but the intensity of the relationship with their pet was no more or less than boys.

Member of the family

They found that 80% of the 1,000 children that took part in the research, considered their pet a member of the family and half confided in their pets as they would a friend. The study revealed that more than a third of children believe their pets understand how they feel.

The research also looked at the impact that pets have on children who do not have siblings, showing the strongest attachment between single children and their pets. The youngest siblings in a family also had stronger attachment to their pets than those with younger [brothers and sisters](#) to care for.

Children of white ethnicity were more likely to own dogs, rodents and 'other' pets, but were no more or less attached to their pets than children of non-white ethnicity. Families that lived in deprived areas were more likely to own a dog than those from more affluent parts.

Dr Carri Westgarth, from the University of Liverpool's Institute of Infection and [Global Health](#), said: "Children who grow up with pets are thought to gain positive health benefits, such as a sense of responsibility and increased physical activity, but until now there has been little attention paid to whether social background, position in the family, and the types of pets owned, make a difference to the way a child relates to

pet animals.

"From the study an overwhelming number felt that their [pet](#) was as important as a family member, and although social background, gender and ethnicity played a role in the types of pets that were likely to be owned, they didn't make a difference to how emotionally attached a child was to the animal.

"This suggests that pets can have a significant impact on the socialisation and emotional wellbeing of children growing up, but more work is needed to understand why some pets are more common in certain groups than others, as well as the specific health benefits that particular types of animals can have and whether these effects last into later adult life."

Playing a crucial role

Dr Sandra McCune, Scientific Leader for Human – Animal Interaction, at WALTHAM, said: "Pets play a crucial role in the development of children; allowing them to socialise, care for and nurture others. This is particularly important for children who do not have siblings to learn from and play with, and for the youngest [siblings](#) in the family who do not have a younger, more dependable sibling to care for.

"Not only are pets good in terms of exercise and responsibility, but also helping children understand relationships."

The research was published in *BMC Veterinary Research*.

Provided by University of Liverpool

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