

# Strong bonds with pets may help foster resiliency in military-connected children

October 29 2014

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Developing resiliency has important benefits for children, especially those from military families faced with significant challenges such as parental deployment and frequent moves. New research published online in *Applied Developmental Science* supports the idea that, along with other key resources, strong attachments to animals may help military-connected children develop resiliency and other positive developmental traits.

"We were interested in seeing if the specific stressors faced by military-connected families could be mitigated by interacting with animals. We found that kids with deployed parents who had developed a deep bond with a family pet reported having better coping strategies in dealing with the stress than those without such ties to a companion animal," said the paper's author, Megan Mueller, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist and research assistant professor at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

The online survey study, conducted with the assistance of the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) and funded by Zoetis Inc., collected responses on measures of human-animal interaction (HAI), positive youth development, stress and adaptive coping strategies from nearly 300 [children](#) in grades 6 through 12. The children reported being from [military families](#) and all participated in youth programs developed by MCEC. Approximately 70 percent of the youth surveyed had family pets and most of them had some involvement in caretaking (for example, 50 percent reported being responsible for feedings).

The study results indicated that greater attachment to companion animals was associated with higher positive youth development scores (which measured characteristics of competence, confidence, connection, character and caring) for all military-connected children.

Children with at least one currently deployed family member had significantly higher perceived stress levels than those who didn't. The researchers also assessed the connection between children's attachment to a companion animal and the strength of their coping skills by measuring how frequently children tried to develop social supports and self-reliance, and seek social activities such as investing in close friendships.

HAI didn't appear to have a strong relationship with coping skills for children without a deployed family member but for youth dealing with deployment there was significant positive association between the two. Further, as previous research conducted by Mueller has underscored, the quality and strength of the attachment between children and their pets was an important aspect of that dynamic.

"It isn't enough to be around animals—children need to be engaged in that relationship. Strong attachments to pets may foster a more proactive attitude about handling stressful problems and could serve as a bridge to developing and maintaining peer relationships during stressful circumstances," Mueller said.

However, Mueller cautions that the study can't determine causality and is a first step to better understanding whether the emotional attachment to a pet could be one way for children to develop positive coping strategies to emotional stressors. But the results may point to a cost-effective way to help military families thrive and foster resiliency during challenging times.

"Through this work, we recognize the importance of establishing connections that help kids develop a sense of responsibility and outward focus. We now know that caring for a pet boosts self-confidence, establishes important routines and provides a stabilizing force in the highly-mobile life of a military child," said Sandy Franklin, Ph.D., of the Military Child Education Coalition.

"We strongly believe in the importance of the human-animal bond among families," said Dr. Christine Jenkins, Chief Veterinary Medical Officer for Zoetis U.S. "Through our partnership with Cummings School and the MCEC, we are working to determine how animal interaction may help children maintain a healthy and positive outlook during a very trying time in their developing years."

**More information:** Mueller, M. K., & Callina, K. S. (2014). Human-animal interaction as a context for thriving and coping in military-connected youth: The role of pets during deployment. *Applied Developmental Science*, 18(4), 1-10. [DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2014.955612](https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2014.955612)

Provided by Tufts University

Citation: Strong bonds with pets may help foster resiliency in military-connected children (2014, October 29) retrieved 12 September 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-10-strong-bonds-pets-foster-resiliency.html>

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