

Family pets boost child development

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Credit: University of Liverpool

Growing up with a pet can bring social, emotional and educational benefit to children and adolescents, according to a new University of Liverpool study. Youngsters with pets tend to have greater self-esteem, less loneliness, and enhanced social skills. This research adds strength to claims that household pets can help support healthy child development.

"Anyone that has grown up with, and loved a [family pet](#) intrinsically feels the value of their companionship," says project lead Dr Carri Westgarth, from the University's Institute of Infection and Global Health. "The scientific evidence investigating the benefits to children and [adolescent development](#) looks promising. We dug deep into that evidence to understand which potential benefits were most strongly supported. Ultimately, this will enable us to know more about how pets provide young people with emotional, educational and social support."

The study, published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, was funded by the WALTHAM Centre for Pet Nutrition, part of Mars Petcare. Researchers carried out an in-depth review and quality evaluation of studies investigating the effects of pet ownership on emotional, educational or behavioural development in children and adolescents.

"Critical ages for the impact of pet ownership on self-esteem, appear to be greatest for children under 6, and preadolescents and adolescents over 10. Generally dogs and cats are deemed to be the best providers of [social support](#), perhaps due to a higher level of interaction and reciprocation in comparison to other pets." says Rebecca Purewal, lead author. "In both western and non-western cultures pets may act as a form of psychological support, helping youths feel good about themselves and enabling a positive self-image."

"The patterns among sub-populations and age groups suggests that companion animals have the potential to promote healthy child and adolescent development" says WALTHAM researcher Nancy Gee, a co-author of the study. "This is an exciting field of study and there is still much to learn about the processes through which [pet ownership](#) may impact healthy child development."

More information: Rebecca Purewal et al. Companion Animals and

Child/Adolescent Development: A Systematic Review of the Evidence,
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