

Pets can help children accept challenges of foster care

June 29 2017, by Sam Carr



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Stable, loving, secure family relationships are vital for child development and well-being. But many children who enter the foster care system have early experiences of neglect, suffering, hurt, and loss, and been deprived of secure parenting.

A key part of fostering is the idea that warm, nurturing relationships with foster families can help to change the developmental course of [children](#) who have suffered inadequate early care.

But by the time they enter [foster care](#), many children have already deeply internalised [early experiences](#) of neglect. This frequently means that they bring negative expectations, fear, anxiety, and resistance into potential new relationships, making the development of closeness and security with [foster parents extremely challenging](#).

In a [recent study](#), we explored how relationships with animals can help children navigate the challenges of settling into new long-term foster homes. Animal relationships have been shown to support psychological well-being across a range of social groups, including [individuals with disabilities](#), [older people](#), and [psychiatric patients](#). They may be also be particularly helpful to children who have lost faith in adult love.

Our study involved the in-depth investigation of eight neglected, maltreated children (aged ten to 16) in the foster care system, all of whom had recently been placed with families that had pet [dogs](#). The children had histories of severe abuse and neglect. They had been in foster care for between four and seven years, and had moved foster homes between seven and ten times. Childhood histories like theirs severely impede the development of a sense of safety, security, and trust in adult caregivers.

The first thing we noticed was the extent to which children mistrusted and felt suspicious of their foster parents. They felt foster parents were simply colluding with a world that they had come to believe was inherently threatening and painful. Family dogs, however, were frequently identified as a "safer" source of closeness.

One child, Jake, aged ten, said of his [relationship](#) with his foster parent,

Trudi: "I can still find it hard being really close with Trudi 'cos everyone in the past has been horrible to me and got rid of me. I guess there's still a chance Trudi might do that so I don't feel totally safe with her. "

Asked about his feelings towards Trudi's pet dog, Zak, however, he said: "I don't mind being really close with Zak 'cos he won't get rid of me, so I feel really safe with him. He's my friend because he wants to be – and not just because he has to be."

One of the most significant ways in which the children related to family dogs was to rely upon them in times of emotional distress (when the dogs were often preferred to foster caregivers). This often involved "contact comfort". Close skin-to-skin contact was a significant part of how animal connections helped to alleviate powerful feelings of fear, sadness, or anger.

Jane, aged 11, told us: "I felt embarrassed crying in front of [my foster parent] Sheila but I could cry and feel safe with the dog on my bed. When I cry he wriggles into my neck and I rest my face against his belly. Then I cry more, but I feel better after I cry. Like the tears help get the worry out my head. I feel safe with him there beside me. Like he wants to help me and stop my bad thoughts."

It was also apparent that the animals offered children a bridge through which they could begin to believe in foster parents as trustworthy and loving. If they were kind to their pets, maybe they would be kind to the children too.

Feeling at home

Jake, who we heard from before, said later on: "[Trudi] took real good care of Zak [the dog] all the time, and never got angry or fed up. She was really nice to him and always made sure that he was okay. I like Zak

so much. I think I was wrong about Trudi because actually she seems nice too. Zak must love her and I know he wouldn't do that if Trudi wasn't really nice."

Pete, ten, also grew to trust his foster mother by observing her relationship with the dog: "She was always nice to him [the dog], so I knew that she'd be nice to me too. Even when he's bad, like barking or biting things, she doesn't hate him, or get rid of him. I liked her because she was dead kind to him all the time."

Pete's foster mother described how he would constantly scrutinise her interactions with the dog: "I felt judged. He was like a shadow for the dog. When I was with the dog he watched my every move."

We did not set out in our study to suggest that animals should be a universal part of the fostering process. Clearly, some children are frightened of animals, not all children respond positively to [animals](#), and some children and caregivers have a history of [animal abuse](#).

However, it is critical that children who have lost faith in adult love find their way back to human relationships that support and nurture them towards psychological health. In order to allow the development of a secure base with children, foster parents must begin to "feel" friendly, caring, and approachable for children, and offer them a safe, non-threatening environment.

Animal relationships aren't a substitute for parental connection. But they can provide vital, non-threatening emotional comfort. Comfort that "holds" children while they come to terms with the anxieties and anger that can cloud their relationships with adults.

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