

# Research into pet ownership during COVID

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La Trobe University researchers have conducted an Australian-first survey about families with children and pets during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study, published in *PLOS ONE*, reveals that, for many Australian

families, pets were a source of much-needed comfort and companionship during the COVID [pandemic](#) and lockdown.

Lead researcher, Dr. Shannon Bennetts, from La Trobe University's Judith Lumley Center, and her team revealed that [anxious children](#) had stronger bonds with their pets. Findings from the survey were also published in the journal *Anthrozoös*, in March.

The survey of 1,034 parents living with a child under 18 years and a cat or dog during the 12-week period from July 29 to October 29, 2020, showed that:

- 1 in 5 families had acquired a new cat or dog during the pandemic, often to assist with family well-being
- Parents described many benefits from having a pet in the family, including companionship, routine, and a welcome distraction
- Parents also reported a diverse range of challenges, including managing pet-child interactions, pets disrupting work and schooling, worries about accessing care and supplies, and worries about the pet's mortality.
- Strong child-pet attachment was associated with greater child anxiety
- Parents who reported themselves as having a strong emotional attachment to their pet had poorer mental health

According to Dr. Bennetts, the survey found that parents and [children](#) who were feeling anxious and unsettled were more likely to have stronger bonds with their pet.

"It's likely that distressed families were seeking out comfort from their canine or feline [family](#) members as a way to cope with change and uncertainty during the pandemic," Dr. Bennetts said.

"These findings suggest that there is a need to carefully monitor the transition back to work and school. Some families might require ongoing psychological supports for themselves, as well as veterinary care to manage separation anxiety in pets."

With more than 30 million pets nationally, Australia has one of the highest rates of pet ownership worldwide. During the pandemic, [pet ownership in Australia](#) increased by about 10%, with almost 70% of households now owning a pet.

While the potential for pets to enhance human well-being has been well-documented—including both psychological and physical benefits such as enhanced [self-esteem](#), increased [physical activity](#), improved hormonal levels, and reduced [heart rate](#)—the pandemic provided a unique opportunity to study the impact of pet ownership in a large number of people isolated from normal social interactions for a long period of time.

"The pandemic has created a highly [stressful environment](#) for some families who are negotiating the challenges of working and learning from home with pets, operating in the absence of their usual social supports and outlets," Dr. Bennetts said.

"This can mean that we are more vulnerable to [psychological distress](#). This environment was particularly difficult for those with pre-existing physical or mental health difficulties."

**More information:** Shannon K. Bennetts et al, Parent and child mental health during COVID-19 in Australia: The role of pet attachment, *PLOS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0271687](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0271687)

Shannon K. Bennetts et al, Companionship and Worries in Uncertain Times: Australian Parents' Experiences of Children and Pets During COVID-19, *Anthrozoös* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/08927936.2022.2051931](https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2022.2051931)

Provided by La Trobe University

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