

# Research finds link between family dog ownership and children's physical activity

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Telethon Kids Institute. Credit: Telethon Kids Institute

Researchers have found a clear link between the acquisition or loss of a

family dog and the level of physical activity undertaken by children in the family, with the impact most noticeable in girls.

The first study to examine the longitudinal effects of dog ownership on children's movement behaviors saw researchers from Telethon Kids Institute and The University of Western Australia follow 600 children over a three-year period to chart the impact of dog ownership (or loss) on physical activity levels.

A paper on the study, "Longitudinal effects of dog ownership, dog acquisition, and dog loss on children's movement behaviors: Findings from the PLAYCE cohort study," has been [published](#) in the *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*.

Children involved in the study were aged between two and seven years, with researchers following their progress from preschool age until their entry into full-time school.

Children's time spent sedentary, on screens and physically active was measured at two separate time points using accelerometers—small devices worn on the hip during waking hours for seven days at a time—in conjunction with parent-report surveys.

Half the children had no dog at any point in the study period, 204 had a dog for the entire three years, 58 acquired a dog during the study period, and 31 children lost a dog during the study period.

"I specifically wanted to look at the longitudinal effects of dog ownership so we could see if there were any changes in children's movement behaviors after adding a dog to the household," lead researcher Emma Adams said.

"We saw a significant jump in [daily physical activity](#) in children whose

families acquired a dog over the study period, while those whose families experienced the loss of a dog recorded a steep drop-off in activity.

"The results were particularly noticeable in girls, with girls who acquired a dog increasing their light intensity activity and games by almost an hour a day (52 minutes). On the flipside, there was a marked drop in light intensity activity and games in girls who experienced the loss of a dog, with their activity dropping by 62 minutes a day."

The team also found that girls and boys who acquired a dog increased their unstructured physical activity—such as playing in the yard, going to the park, walking or playing with the dog—by around seven occasions a week, compared to no changes in children whose family did not have a dog.

"If we excluded dog walking and playing, there were no changes in the unstructured physical activity, so we could see the changes in physical activity were actually from the addition of those dog-related activities," Adams said.

By contrast, children who lost a dog reduced their unstructured physical activity by 10.2 sessions a week for girls and 7.7 sessions a week for boys.

"What these results show is that dog ownership can have a [positive influence](#) on children's physical activity and that we start to see those benefits from [early childhood](#)," Adams said.

"Regular physical activity from an early age is essential for children's physical and [mental health](#) and development, but few children or adolescents are meeting recommended daily levels.

"Our findings indicate that having a dog in the family could help promote healthy movement behaviors in children and reduce their short- and long-term risk of chronic disease.

"It's important to note that we're not telling families to just go out and get a dog—having a dog comes with many responsibilities and won't be right for everyone. Rather, it's about encouraging families who already have a dog to make more use of this mechanism to encourage physical activity, because not all children who have a dog will be walking and playing with the dog."

Adams said this was the first study to demonstrate the relationship between dogs and certain types of children's physical activity over an extended period of time.

"Previous studies have focused on adults or looked at the impact of dog ownership on children's physical activity at one point in time, but there have been no [longitudinal studies](#) looking at the [causal relationship](#) between dog ownership and kids' movement behaviors," she said.

"Our study also provides the first evidence of the impact of dog loss on young children's movement behaviors—something which has not been studied before."

**More information:** Emma K. Adams et al, Longitudinal effects of dog ownership, dog acquisition, and dog loss on children's movement behaviours: findings from the PLAYCE cohort study, *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* (2024). [DOI: 10.1186/s12966-023-01544-9](#)

Provided by Telethon Kids Institute

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