

Pets, Early Adolescents, and Families

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ABSTRACT. This paper reviews the patterns and effects of early adolescents' involvement in the care of animals and the relationship between that experience and selected family and individual variables. It provides baseline data on early adolescents and animal involvement concerning: species of animals, family income, family relationships, parental views of animal raising, animal owner self-esteem and self-management, and the view of youth on the benefits of animal involvement.

Domestication of animals for food and labor as well as for companions has long been established. Humans have had a prolonged interaction with animals from antiquity (Reed, 1959). Animals first provided basic resource needs of humans for food, clothing and shelter (Levinson, 1969), and later evolved to meet the psychological needs of their owners (Mugford, 1977). Where once animals served primarily as food, co-hunters, herders and protectors, broad cultural changes in the way individuals live have contributed to the rise in importance in the role of the animal as a companion and social interaction facilitator.

Bryant (1972) summarized the pervasive influence of animals on language, arts, economic and interpersonal behavior as well as our laws and observed that the phenomena which he aptly calls the "zoological connection" deserves increased research attention as an area of social causation. Levinson (1982) identified four major areas of investigation of animal human interaction that he believed would be useful.

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(1) the role of animals in various human cultures and ethnic groups over centuries; (2) the effect of association with animals on human personality development; (3) human-animal communication; and (4) the therapeutic use of animals in formal psychotherapy, institutional settings and residential arrangements for handicapped and aged populations. (p. 283)

Using an ecosystems perspective of the family (Bubolz et al., 1979), it is important to study the effects of animals in the family system and upon the development of family members. The purpose of this study is to examine the pattern and effect of early adolescents' involvement in the care of animals and the relationship between that experience and selected family and individual variables.

CHILDREN CARING FOR ANIMALS

A substantial proportion of children studied have been involved in interaction with animals. Bowd (1982), in interviewing 37 kindergarten children from middle and lower-class families noted that 86 percent of them had pets in the family and that 46 percent had multiple pets. Salomon (1981) whose Canadian sample was predominately middle class, also found a high incidence of pet ownership with 53 percent of the children owning a pet at the kindergarten level and 90 percent at the sixth grade. The peak ownership level in her study was 94 percent for 10 year olds.

The reported choice of animal or animal preference favors the traditional companion animal in frequency as might be expected. In the Salomon study (1981), furry animals were very important with most children either expressing a desire to have one or already owning one. Proportionally more of the younger children had fish than mammals. Cats and dogs were popular at all ages and with both boys and girls. Burke (1903) had earlier observed that girls preferred cats, his observations being based upon a sample of nearly 3,000 children's essays on a preferred pet.

Mention of domesticated animals other than traditional companion animals and horses is rare. Bowd (1982) observed that only 38 percent of the young children he interviewed were aware of the role of human care in the distinction between domestic and wild animals. The preponderance of all the literature on companion animals and

pets seems to focus upon the dog. Some studies either sample dog owners and generalize to pet owners, or fail to mention the species of animal (Bowd, 1982; Hyde, Kurdek, and Larson, 1983; Keddie, 1977). The degree of relevance of animal species or breed upon the human-animal bond is yet to be fully explained though Kidd and Kidd (1980) have noted differences in owner personality between dog and cat lovers, and Serpell (1981) observed a relationship between childhood experiences and adult attitudes, and pet preferences. It is unclear from these pieces of research how many children from all segments of our society have pets and what species of animals these youths have. Do children care for animals other than dogs and cats? Is there a sex difference among animal ownership for different species? Do girls prefer cats as Burke found, do more boys own dogs, what about large animal ownership? Is there an age difference?

Research Questions: To what extent do early adolescents care for an animal? What is the distribution of animal species for boys and girls?

THE FAMILY

Cultural folk wisdom in America has supported the decisions of families to include pets in the household. Pets are also considered to be social assets (Luborsky et al., 1973). In fact, pet owners frequently view their pets as family members (Smith, 1983; Cain, 1983; Ruby, 1983; Hichrod, 1982) showing great attachment to them and treating them as if the animals could communicate (Cain, 1983) and as if they were empathic (Fox, 1981).

On the other hand, not all families have or want pets, for as Guttman (1981) noted, non-pet owners perceive animals as a burden or responsibility, or cause of household untidiness. Guttman found that pet owners more than non-pet owners object to being alone and often have pets for sociability. Non-pet owners still have positive attitudes toward pets and think animals are fine for someone else. Nevertheless, not all pets are problem free. They may put a burden on family finances, compete for time with social and business commitments and cause problems for the owner, the owner's family and neighbors (Mugford, 1981).

Why do some families choose to have pets while others do not? Does a family system with pets have better family relations than non-pet families?

Research Questions: Are there differences between families whose early adolescents have cared for an animal and those families which have not? Do early adolescents who have an animal feel closer to their parents?

BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Feldman (1970) compiled a short list of owners' needs for a pet from the literature: "(1) friend and partner, (2) self-identity and self-esteem, (3) facilitation and catalysis, and (4) childhood development" (p. 306.) This list is not unlike the sample of 50 parents who voluntarily replied to Salomon's (1981) open-ended query as to why they had allowed or encouraged their children to have pets. The parents reported that they believed that the pet was an unconditional friend, playmate or listener, that the pet developed a sense of responsibility, that the child's experience was broadened by giving the child an opportunity to make empirical observations of life processes, and that the child developed a respect for animals. Feldman's listing focused on outcomes while Solomon reported processes clearly related to those outcomes.

Potential benefits for children who have pets have been proposed for all age groups (Levinson, 1972). The role of the pet as the "transitional object" (Winecott, 1953) of early life that bridges the gap between self and other, the companion that provides nonjudgmental interaction and affection (Subman, 1981; Levinson, 1967), the animal provides for the child's management of negative feelings (Ryneron, 1978; Schowalter, 1983), the friend that supports the child's ability to cross boundaries in peer interaction (Feldman, 1978), the joyful playmate (VanLeeuwen, 1981) have all been suggested.

What research has been done on these suggestions? Those benefits derived through pet facilitated therapy have been discussed elsewhere (Allen, 1983). Fewer studies of the benefits to normal, healthy children have been reported.

Salomon (1980) provided anecdotal support from her sample of elementary school children for the roles of companion, playmate, confidante, object for love and affection, and object for responsible

care and addition from the child. Hyde, Kurdel and Larson (1983) found young adult pet owners showed greater empathy and interpersonal trust when compared to non-pet owners, but did not find a difference in self-esteem.

A group of 507 adolescents that included normal high school youths as well as emotionally impaired and delinquent youth voluntarily replied to an open ended questionnaire on the role of pets in their lives (Robin et al., 1983). The most common benefit identified was companionship and friendship. The response that the pet was a member of the family was more common in public school youth than the other two groups. Delinquent youth tended to play alone with their pets and use the pet as a confidante three times more frequently than public school youth; they also reported that their pet protected them from physical harm more frequently than public school youths. When asked why pets were good for children, this adolescent group reported in order to frequency: (1) companionship and fun to be with; (2) a source of learning about responsibility and animal life; and (3) as someone to love and be loved by. All the respondents perceived benefits deriving from having a pet with the pet playing a special role in the lives of delinquent and impaired youth.

Benefits for physical health have been reported for adults, though there seems to be a lack of comparable studies using children as subjects (Katcher, 1981; Friedmann et al., 1980).

There have been many suggestions as to the benefits of animal care for children, but very little research has been conducted which can be generalized to most children.

Research Questions: Do parents see caring for an animal as important? Is there a difference in self-esteem and self-management between early adolescents who have cared for an animal and those who have not? What are the benefits of caring for an animal as perceived by early adolescents? Do early adolescents perceive the death of a pet as stressful? Do early adolescents use pets to reduce their stress?

SAMPLE

The research reported here is a secondary analysis using the Michigan Early Adolescent Survey which surveyed Michigan youth 10-to 14-years-of-age. A sample of 285 Michigan families was inter-

viewed. Early adolescents chosen for this study were selected using a stratified multistage cluster approach. Twenty-five clusters were assigned 12 interviews each which totaled 304 families. Counties were assigned random numbers based upon population. Two densely populated counties, Wayne and Oakland, had more interviews than could possibly be conducted, consequently, substitutions were made based on similarity of demographics. In each of the 20 counties selected, school districts were assigned random numbers based upon their numbers of students. Two school districts from each county were randomly selected. Lists of youths in grades 5, 6, 7, and 8 were obtained, and equal numbers of males and females from each grade were randomly selected.

Each youth was interviewed in his/her home and a questionnaire was administered to each parent separately in two-parent homes and to the parent in one-parent homes. The interviews dealt with several topic areas in addition to that which is presented in this paper. Each interview took about an hour to complete.

Description of Families

Of the early adolescents who completed the survey 50.5 percent were females. Approximately three-fourths of the youth sampled were evenly split into ages eleven, twelve and thirteen. The remaining one-fourth was evenly divided between 10 and 14 year olds. These early adolescents were distributed evenly over the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grades.

Eighty-two percent of the sample was white. Almost 19 percent was black. The remaining families were Mexican-American and other ethnic groups. Thirty percent of the families in this study reported a family income of \$20,000–\$30,000. Another 30 percent reported an income of \$30,000–\$55,000. Four percent were over \$55,000. A little over 30 per cent reported income under \$20,000.

Many more early adolescents (94.8%) lived with their natural mother than lived with their natural father (75.5%). Adoptive parents make up 2 percent of the mothers and 2.5 percent of the fathers. Step-parents make up 1.2 percent of the mothers and 4.7 percent of the fathers.

Over 50 percent of the fathers reported having a high school education or having attended college (but not graduating). Almost one-third were college graduates and/or had attended professional school. Two-thirds of the fathers were in the age group 36–50 years of age.

Seventy percent of the fathers were employed by others, most of them in skilled work, professional or management positions.

FINDINGS

For each of the findings discussed below, a correlation coefficient was computed. For Bernoulli variables, Phi Coefficients were computed. In other cases, Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients were computed.

Early Adolescents Caring for Animals

When these early adolescents were asked if they had cared for an animal for a long period of time, i.e., a month or more, 89.4 percent said that they had. One out of ten early adolescents indicated that they had never cared for an animal. Table 1 shows the breakdown of species of animal by sex of the adolescents. It shows that a variety of species are cared for by adolescents. Dogs were the most frequently owned animal with about 40 percent of the youths listing dogs. When considering the sex of the animal owner, only cat owners and large animal owners show a significant difference with more cat owners being girls and more large animal owners being boys. There was no difference in animal ownership based on age. Youths of all grades 5 thru 8 equally owned animals.

Table 1: SEX OF ANIMAL OWNERS

	Boys n=141	Girls n=144	r
Dog	83.1%	77.3%	-.07
Cat	48.0	60.2	.12*
Rabbit or Hamster	34.0	34.0	-.00
Fish or Bird	29.8	31.9	.02
Large Animal (Calf, goat, sheep, pig)	16.3	9.7	-.10*
Horse	13.1	17.9	.07
Any animal	89.4	87.5	-.03

* $p < .05$

Families of Animal Owners

When examining the question of whether or not families of animal owners differed from non-animal owners, we examined the family income and family residence. As Table 2 shows as income increases animal ownership by early adolescents increases.

Specifically, as income increases, fish/bird and dog/cat ownership increases. No significant differences were found generally between animal owners in rural and urban areas. Although as we would expect, horse and large animal owners live in rural areas. (See Table 3.)

When the youth were asked to describe their relationships with their mothers and with their fathers, there was no significant differences between animal owners and non-animal owners. When each parent was asked to describe his/her relationship with his/her child, again no significant differences were found between animal owners and non-animal owners. (See Table 4.) Animal ownership does not seem to be related to the family's perception of closeness of family relationships.

Benefits for Early Adolescents and Families

Parents view caring for animals as beneficial. When parents were asked what skills were important for their child to learn, 94 percent of the mothers and fathers said that it was important.

Table 2: FAMILY INCOME

	Low (less than \$20,000) n=86	Med. (\$20-30,000) n=81	High (over \$30,000) n=98	r
Any Pet	82.6%	91.4%	93.9%	.15**
Dog or Cat	72.1	82.7	85.7	.14**
Rabbit or Hamster	34.9	29.6	37.8	.03
Fish or Bird	23.3	30.9	39.8	.15**
Large Animal (Calf, Pig, Sheep, Goat)	10.5	13.6	13.3	.03
Horses	17.4	11.3	18.0	.01

** p < .01

TABLE 3: RURAL/URBAN FAMILIES

	Rural (farm or small town) n=152	Urban (over 5,000) n=126	r
Any Pet	91.4%	86.5%	-.08
Dog or Cat	82.2	78.6	-.05
Rabbit or Hamster	36.8	31.7	-.05
Fish or Bird	28.3	34.9	.07
Large Animal (Calf, pig, sheep, goat)	22.4	1.6	-.31***
Horse	23.9	5.6	-.25***

*** p <.0001

Table 4: YOUTH'S RELATIONSHIP WITH MOTHER

Relationship	Pet Ownership	
	no n=29	yes n=247
poor	0.0	.8
fair	3.4	4.0
good	34.5	29.6
very close	62.1	65.6

no significant differences found

YOUTH'S RELATIONSHIP WITH FATHER

Relationship	Pet Ownership	
	no n=26	yes n=235
poor	0%	1.7%
fair	3.8	12.3
good	61.5	35.3
very close	34.6	50.6

no significant differences found

Self-Esteem

Using Coopersmith's Self-Esteem Scale (1967), a .13 Pearson Correlation Coefficient was found (significant at .05). Specifically for species, dog owners had a higher self-esteem with a correlation coefficient of .11 (significant at .05). It appears that early adolescent animal owners have higher self-esteem than non-animal owners.

Considering club membership as a measurement of sociability, more animal owners than non-animal owners are club members. Also examining sociability, youth were asked if they had participated in four leadership activities. No difference was found between animal owners and non-animal owners.

Self-Management

Using a six-item scale, each parent was asked about the level of his/her child's self-management skills. The scale had a reliability of .70. Generally, animal owners did not seem to have higher self-management skills. However, mothers reported that rabbit/hamster owners did have higher self-management skills ($r = .11$, significant at .05). There were no differences reported by fathers.

Adolescents Perceive Gain from Animals

What do adolescents perceive they gain from animals? Generally adolescents reported gaining responsibility, friendship/love/fun, and knowledge about animals. More rabbit/hamster owners reported gaining responsibility than other pet owners. More dog, horse, and fish/bird owners reported gaining friendship/love/fun than other pet owners. (See Table 5.)

Adolescents, Stress, and Pets

In answer to the question "Did you receive or lose a pet in the last year?", 55.5 percent of the early adolescents said "yes." Of these youths, 59.5 percent said that this affected them "a lot," 29.1 percent said this affected them "a little," and 11.5 percent said this affected them "not at all." Owners of large animals had a stronger correlation than the other species (significant at .01). Sex of owner did not seem to make a difference.

When these early adolescents were asked if they played with a pet

Table 5: WHAT ADOLESCENTS SAY THEY GAIN FROM ANIMALS

	Boys n=141	Girls n=144
Friendship	31.9%	27.1%
Knowledge	31.9	36.1
Responsibility	38.3	45.8
Getting Along w/others	5.0	4.9

ADOLESCENTS GAIN BY SPECIES OF ANIMAL

Species	Friendship		Knowledge		Responsibility		Getting Along	
	%	r	%	r	%	r	%	r
Dog	87.8	.13*	85.3	.10	78.4	-.04	71.4	-.05
Cat	57.9	.06	57.9	.06	53.8	-.006	53.8	-.002
Rabbit/ Hamster	40.5	.09	35.1	.02	41.7	.14*	50.0	.08
Fish/Bird	38.1	.10*	37.1	.10*	35.8	.09	21.4	-.05
Lg. Animal	17.9	.09	15.5	.05	17.5	.11*	14.4	.01
Horse	23.8	.16**	17.4	-.04	13.7	-.05	18.2	.02

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

when they were upset 48.5 percent said "yes" and 26.1 percent said "sometimes." There was no correlation between species of pet and use of pet for stress reduction. Neither was there any correlation between sex of early adolescent and use of pet for stress reduction.

SUMMARY

1. 89.4 percent of the early adolescents have cared for an animal for a long period of time.
2. Early adolescents owned a large variety of pets. Dogs were the most frequently owned pet with cats, rabbit/hamster, fish/bird, large animals, and horses following in that order.
3. Girls had more cats than boys. Boys did not seem to have more dogs than girls. Boys had more large animals than girls.

4. There did not seem to be a relationship between the youth's age and pet ownership.
5. As income increased, pet ownership increased. Specifically, as income increased, fish/bird ownership and dog ownership increased.
6. Youth with horses or large animals for pets were more likely to live in rural areas.
7. Pet ownership did not seem to suggest a better perceived relation with parents.
8. Parents viewed caring for animals as beneficial.
9. Early adolescent animal owners were more likely to have a higher self-esteem.
10. An animal owner was more likely to be a club member.
11. Early adolescent animal owners were not reported by their parents to show more self-management than non-animal owners.
12. When the youth were asked what they had gained from their pet, they reported gaining responsibility, friendship/love/fun, and knowledge. Dog, horse, and fish/bird owners were more likely to say friendship/love/fun. Rabbit/hamster owners were more likely to say something which indicated learning responsibility.
13. The death of a pet was very stressful.
14. Early adolescents used pets for stress reduction.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings for early adolescents confirm Bowd's findings (1982) with kindergarten children and Salomon's findings (1981) with grade 6 early adolescents that 85–90 percent of children had pets. Just as Burke (1903) found, these findings suggest that girls had more cats than boys. This research further suggests that early adolescents had many species of animals in addition to dogs and cats which have been traditionally studied. While Levinson (1982) indicated that all studies separate companion animals from domestic animals, this study found the positive benefits occurred for both companion and domestic animal owners. The animal/human bond appears to have occurred with both companion and domestic animals.

Early adolescents whose families were better off economically were more likely to have an animal. There seems to be a direct relationship between parent's income and the opportunity to obtain the benefits of animal ownership.

While pet owners did not seem to have better relationships with their parents than other adolescents, they did seem to have higher levels of self-esteem. Animal ownership seems to affect the individual more than the family, but more consideration of this is needed with a closer examination of other family system variables. Youths said they gain responsibility, friendship/love/fun, and knowledge from their pets. Again, these seem to be individual benefits.

Early adolescent animal owners also indicated that their pet was both a source of stress and used for stress reduction. This area needs a more careful examination of the specific causes of stress and the process used when pets become stress reducers.

This study provides baseline data which because of random selection of subjects can be generalized to early adolescents. The next step would be a more indepth examination of the relationship between early adolescents and pets. For example, this study found that early adolescents care for a variety of species of animals, but it did not examine the degree of involvement. Are youths more involved with furry animals, with household pets, with small pets? Does the degree of involvement matter for a general population rather than a clinical population? Would we find that youths who are highly involved with their pets are more responsible or possibly less sociable?

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