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The Health Benefits that Growing Up with Pets Can Provide to College Students

Vivienne Alonso and Stephanie Hinojosa

Hanover College

Abstract

Attachment to a pet has been shown to have a variety of benefits for various special needs population. Previous studies suggested that socializing with pets encourages the mental and physical health of the elderly in many of the same ways that human interactions does (e.g., providing a sense of love, feeling of security, and a sense of purpose and responsibility). In addition, other research has demonstrated that the presence of pets during a divorce can assist the difficult transition for children. Another important transition for many individuals is college. This study examined whether college students would have better physical and psychological well being due to growing up with the companionship of a pet. The expected results are that college students that were raised with pets will adjust better than those raised without pets. Participants will be undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college. Four questionnaires will be distributed to college students: a demographic questionnaire about participant's pet history; The Pet Attachment Scale (e.g., how affectionate people are with their pets); The Pet Commitment Scale (e.g., a person's resolve to keep a pet despite monetary expense); The Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire, which measures psychological and physical well being. The relationship between college students' past pet history, the strength of their relationship with their pet, and their psychological well being will be determined. This study may help to demonstrate the benefits of pets to groups besides special needs groups, especially college students dealing with the stress of college adjustment.

The Health Benefits that Growing Up with Pets Can Provide to College Students

When observing college students it becomes clear that some are better adjusted than others. Many factors can have a role on how adjusted someone is at college, quite possibly even their attachment to their pets. Research has shown that a well adjusted college student has a secured attachment with their parents and separation- individuation (Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004). This secure attachment helps individuals become adjusted when entering new places and situations. This is because they turn to their parents for support when entering a new situation, but are still capable of functioning separate from them and are able to make decisions for themselves in everyday life as individuals, especially when entering college. Therefore, it would seem that attachment to another individual places a key role college adjustment.

According to Rice, et al. (1995) attachment is an enduring emotional bond that forms between individuals across a period of time. Attachment has been seen to happen between people, but it is also possible to occur between humans and their pets. Attachment is an important part of understanding the relationship between humans and their pets (Staats, et al, 1996). This is because pets serve as therapeutic tools and as companions in minimizing loneliness to those whom have inadequate support networks (Netting, Wilson, & New, 1987).

Most research that deals with pets discusses their usefulness in therapy. Pets are valuable tools when used in therapy because the mere presence of a pet can increase the therapist's attractiveness thus making the patient feel more comfortable and allowing the patient to open up more to the therapist (Eddy, Hart, & Boltz, 2001). Hanselman (2001) suggests that pet therapy has been tailored specifically for every client, and it helps to put a person at ease. Therefore, just the presence of a pet can be beneficial to a person because it allows the person in therapy to feel more at ease and be more open with the therapist, thereby adding to the therapeutic process.

As such, current research suggests that pets are not only being helpful during therapy, but are also effective with regard to providing support for the patient in both therapy sessions and every day life. Winkler, et al. (1989) suggest that socializing with pets encourages mental health of the elderly in many of the same ways that human interaction does, such as providing a sense of love, feelings of security, and a sense of purpose and responsibility. There is empirical support that suggests that pets have the capability of promoting behavior that is beneficial to an owner's health (Ory & Goldberg, 1983). Johnson and Rule (1991) support the notion that pets improve one's health by proposing that pets provides owners with a longer lifespan, the ability to recover more quickly from illnesses, an increased immunity to depression, and an overall higher level of life satisfaction. With the camaraderie of a pet, a person is more likely to develop a sense independence, responsibility, and self-respect (Corson, Corson & Gwynne, 1975), as well as sustain a sense of reality (Levinson, 1972). It is as though pets help develop positive personality traits in their owners. These examples of the positive health capabilities pets provide while dealing with the mental health of humans are only effective if there is a bond or an attachment to the pet. It has been observed that pet attachment is associated with psychological well being (Ory & Goldberg, 1983; Garrity, Stallones, Marx, & Johnson, 1989). While having a pet is beneficial to the individuals who are in therapy, having a pet around is not sufficient enough to improve mental health; one must form an attachment to the pet in order to gain the benefits of improved mental and physical health for an extended period of time.

Most of the research that has been done concerning pets has involved individuals in special needs groups. Tucker et.al. (1995) define individuals with special needs as those who are institutionalized or who have recently experienced a major stressful life event. Netting, Wilson, & New (1987) inform that the research of human-animal bonds has been mainly focused on

those individuals with special needs such as children, the disabled, the mentally handicapped, the imprisoned, the elderly, and other special population groups. When taken together, these two ideas imply that the companionship of a pet can be utilized by almost any individual at some point in life in order to gain positive health benefits, especially during stressful periods.

One of the most stressful times in an individual's life is adolescence, the phase where one goes from being a child to becoming an adult. During this phase, pets have been seen as silent counselors, best friends, and substitute siblings to some adolescents (Arehart-Treichel, 1982; Beck & Katcher, 1983). A pet provides a secure and reliable source of affection during a turbulent time of uncertainty and transformation for adolescents (Brown, et al. 1996). Wolfe (1977) agrees that pets are transitional objects during traumatic times especially during adolescence, because pets provide consolation and reduce stress. Pets have been used as research and therapeutic tools in the elderly, mentally handicapped, and other special needs groups, and it has been shown that pets help reduce stress throughout a person's life time. Therefore, it is highly likely that pets can perform these same tasks of reducing stress levels in young adults and college students who have grown up with a pet.

The research that has been done concerning pets tends to show that having an attachment or a relationship with a pet is beneficial to one's mental and physical health, especially in times of great stress. Also, if a person can have a secure attachment to a parent and be well adjusted, it is possible that having a strong attachment, though it is not the same as parental attachment, to a pet can have the same positive results. Therefore, this study focuses on the potential benefits that college students may have received as a result of growing up with a pet at home. Since pets are doing a great job with people with special needs, they may also be able to help college students with the stressful environment that college provides. How close the participant is to a pet will be

investigated, as well as the amount of time spent with the pet. Therefore the hypothesis of this study is: college students will be more stable and have better mental health as a result having a strong attachment to a pet at home.

Method

Participants

Participants were all at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. There were a total of fifty-nine participants, 58% males and 42% females ranging from the age of 18 –20 years, with a mean age of 20. There were 81% pet owners and 19% non-pet owners. There were 98% Caucasian and 2% Asian.

Measures

The following surveys were used in this research:

Pet Questionnaire. This questionnaire had questions that dealt with how many pets the participants had, if they were close to their pet(s), and who was responsible for the pet(s). (See Appendix A).

Pet Attachment Scale The scale is a Pet Relationship Scale, which measures three major components of relationships to pets: affectionate companionship, equal family member status (e.g. whether the pet is seen as a member of the family), and mutual physical activity (e.g. if the owner and the pet go out for runs together). This scale was developed by Staats, et al. (1996). It has a good reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .83). (See Appendix B).

Pet Commitment Scale. This scale assesses commitment, which is defined as a willingness to expend effort or resources. This scale deals with how much a person is willing to put up with the inconveniences of a pet (e.g. If a pet destroyed a \$50 piece of furniture or personal item, I would get rid of it). This scale was developed by Staats, et al. (1996). The

Miller-Rada Commitment to Pets Scale has high internal reliability (Coefficient Alpha = .86). (See Appendix C).

Personal- Emotional Subscale. This was a subscale of the Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire (SACQ). This subscale has two subscales. One of the subscales measured psychological well being (e.g. I haven't been feeling tense or nervous lately). It has a good reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .84). The other subscale measures physical well being (e.g. I haven't been sleeping very well lately). It has a low reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .57). Both of these subscales were used to measure the participants' adjustment to college. (See Appendix D).

Procedure

Some of the participants received extra credit as a result of participating and were able to sign-up for this experiment that was available on the Psychology lounge bulletin board. The participants signed an informed consent that was handed out to them at the beginning of the experiment. They were informed that they would receive extra credit for participating and that they could leave at any time without fear of losing their extra credit. The informed consent told the participants that they were in an experiment that was studying adjustment to college. The participants were also informed that they could skip any question that made them uncomfortable.

Once the informed consent was signed, the experimenters handed them a packet that contained the surveys. The surveys were included with a series of other surveys for additional research, and they were counterbalanced for order effect. The surveys were ordered randomly in a packet so that the participants did not realize what was being studied. When the participants were done with the survey the experimenter then handed the participants a debriefing sheet,

which explained what the study was really about. They were also informed that they could contact the advisor or the school's counseling services if they wanted to further discuss the study.

Results

This study tested whether there is a relationship between pet attachment and college adjustment. We hypothesized that college students will be more stable and have better mental health as a result of having an attachment to a pet at home. Several correlations were run to see if there were relationships between pet attachment and college adjustment, psychological well being, and physical well being. The relationship between pet attachment and college adjustment, as measured by the personal-emotional subscale of the SACQ was $r = .01$ ($p > .05$, $n = 59$). The relationship between pet attachment and psychological well being, as measured by the personal-emotional subscale of the SACQ was $r = -.03$ ($p > .05$, $n = 59$). The relationship between pet attachment and physical well being, as measured by the personal-emotional subscale of the SACQ was $r = -.03$ ($p > .05$, $n = 59$). None of the results were significant.

Several correlations were run to see if there were relationships between pet commitment and college adjustment, psychological well being, and physical well being. The relationship between pet commitment and college adjustment, as measured by the personal-emotional subscale of the SACQ was $r = -.06$ ($p > .05$, $n = 59$). The relationship between pet commitment and psychological well being, as measured by the personal-emotional subscale of the SACQ was $r = .06$ ($p > .05$, $n = 59$). The relationship between pet commitment and physical well being, as measured by the personal-emotional subscale of the SACQ was $r = .01$ ($p > .05$, $n = 59$). None of the results were significant.

For additional results a correlation was also run to determine the relationship between psychological adjustment and number of pets $r = -.247$ ($p = .06$, $n = 59$). This correlation was approaching statistical significance.

Discussion

The results do not support the hypothesis that college students will be more stable and have better mental health as a result of having an attachment to a pet at home. No relationship was found between how attached people are to their pets and college adjustment.

The lack of support, for the hypothesis, could be related to numerous factors. First, when asking the participants to list the number of pets they possess, more emphasis should have been placed on a specific pet they were attached to, and not just the number of pets they possess. There is a possibility that if the participants had been asked for a specific pet that was special to them, the attachment levels could have been strong and possibly significant. Secondly, perhaps the researchers were expecting for there to be a stronger attachment to pets than possible. Love and Murdock (2004) suggest that attachment can fluctuate depending on the change of situations or location. This study implies that college students might not be committed to their pets, due to the fact that they are in college and are away from them. Based on Love and Murdock, the situation and location for these college students changed, thus causing their attachment to their pets to fluctuate.

Thirdly, the fact that college students and pet attachment was studied could have been a problem. According to Garriety et al. (1989) most of the research concerning pet attachment mostly deals with the elderly, lonely, and those who are in special needs groups. Most college students are not elderly and are probably not lonely due to the fact that they have many resources in which they can receive support. Finally, our additional findings suggest that people with more

pets are less psychologically adjusted. It is possible that people with more pets might not have strong separation-individuation. This implies that they need their pets for support and do not handle the separation from their pets well.

When it comes to limitations and ways to improve this study, there are a few things that can be adjusted. The way that the surveys were formatted could have been an issue. When the surveys were combined, the likert scales were reversed. For future research, it would probably be best if all the scales were similar. This could have caused confusion for the participants while they were filling out the survey. There is a possibility that the time of year in which the study was done could have affected the results. Different results could have been collected if the study was run at the beginning of the academic school year instead of in the middle of the second semester. A possible research idea for the future would be to study pet attachment, college adjustment, and separation-individuation together, since it seems like the more pets a person has, the less psychologically adjusted they are.

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Appendix A: Pet Questionnaire

Do you have any pets? If so, how many? _____

What kind of pet(s) do you have? _____

How long have you had your pet? _____

In your household who was responsible for your pet(s) (includes bathing, feeding, and exercising it)? _____

Did you cuddle with your pet(s)?(circle one) Yes or No

For what reason did your family have a pet(s)? _____

How much time do you spend with your pet(s) (when you are at home)? (circle one)

10 minutes/day 30 minutes/day 1hr/day 3 hr/day 5+ hr/day

Was your pet an indoor or outdoor pet?(circle one) Indoor Outdoor

Appendix B: Pet Attachment

(Please skip this page if you do not own a pet.)

How many pets do you own?

Circle the number representing your degree of agreement.

1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= neutral, 4= disagree, 5= strongly disagree

- 1 2 3 4 5 1. I meet new people because of my pet.
- 1 2 3 4 5 2. My pet is more bother than it is worth.
- 1 2 3 4 5 3. My pet helps me get through tough times.
- 1 2 3 4 5 4. I wish I did not have a pet.
- 1 2 3 4 5 5. There are times I'd be lonely without my pet.
- 1 2 3 4 5 6. My pet give me a reason for getting up in the morning.
- 1 2 3 4 5 7. My pet knows when I'm upset and tries to comfort me.
- 1 2 3 4 5 8. My pet helps me to be more physically active.
- 1 2 3 4 5 9. I feel committed and responsible for the care of my pet.
- 1 2 3 4 5 10. I miss my pet when I am away from home.
- 1 2 3 4 5 11. I do not intend to get another pet in the future.
- 1 2 3 4 5 12. My pet is like a member of the family.

Appendix C: Pet Commitment

For the following questions, please circle the number representing your degree of agreement.

1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= neutral, 4= disagree, 5= strongly disagree

- 1 2 3 4 5 If a pet destroyed a \$50 piece of furniture or personal item, I would get rid of it.
- 1 2 3 4 5 If a pet destroyed a \$4,000 piece of furniture or personal item, I would get rid of it.
- 1 2 3 4 5 If a young pet required extensive veterinary care, I would get rid of it.
- 1 2 3 4 5 If an old pet required extensive veterinary care, I would get rid of it.
- 1 2 3 4 5 If a three-month-old puppy or kitten were having problems with housebreaking, I would get rid of it.
- 1 2 3 4 5 If a six-month-old puppy or kitten were having problems with housebreaking, I would get rid of it.
- 1 2 3 4 5 If an adult dog or cat were having problems with housebreaking, I would get rid of it.
- 1 2 3 4 5 If a three-month-old puppy or kitten were having problems with destructiveness, I would get rid of it.
- 1 2 3 4 5 If an adult dog or cat were having problems with destructiveness, I would get rid of it.

Appendix D: College Adjustment Questionnaire

The statements below describe college experiences. Read each one and decide how well it applies to you at the present time (within the past few days). For each statement, circle the number at the point in the continuum that best represents how closely the statement applies to you. Circle only one number for each statement. To change an answer, draw an X through the incorrect response and circle the desired response or simply erase the answer that doesn't apply.

1=Applies Very Closely to Me, 9= Doesn't Apply to Me at All

1. I have been feeling tense or nervous lately.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
2. Lately I have been feeling blue and moody a lot.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
3. I have felt tired much of the time lately.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
4. Being on my own, taking responsibility for myself, has not been easy.1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
5. I haven't been able to control my emotions very well lately.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
6. My appetite has been good lately.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
10. I have been having a lot of headaches lately.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
11. I've given a lot of thought lately to whether I should ask for help from
the Psychological/Counseling Services Center or from a psychotherapist
outside of college.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
12. I've put on (or lost) too much weight recently.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
13. I have been getting angry too easily lately.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
14. I haven't been sleeping very well.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
15. Sometimes my thinking gets muddled up too easily.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
16. I worry a lot about my college expenses.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

17. I have been feeling in good health lately.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
18. I am experiencing a lot of difficulty coping with the stresses imposed
upon me in college.....1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9