

Title: 'Our dog helps with emotional regulation, confidence, and calmness.' Parental perspectives of the role of pets in the social inclusion and wellbeing of autistic children

Objectives:

Animal assisted therapies or intervention (AAT/AAI) studies show positive impacts of animals for autistic individuals. However, less is known about human-pet attachment for autistic children. Findings from the AAT literature may not translate to pets given that animals involved in AAT are commonly highly trained and the animal is present during a therapeutic intervention only. The role, purpose, and nature of interactions with a pet therefore differ. The current study seeks to investigate the longer-term impact a pet has on the social inclusion and wellbeing for autistic children.

Methods:

Using a mixed method design, 65 parents of autistic children took part in an online survey that asked about their children's relationships with their pets, their child's social skills, relationships, wellbeing and sensory sensitivities. Open ended questions asked about the positive and negative impacts of having a pet.

Results:

Linear regressions revealed predictive effects of pet attachment on anxiety and emotional symptoms. A thematic analysis of opened ended questions identified six emerging themes: 1) Anxiety, emotion regulation, and sleep. 2) Understanding of self and others. 3) Communication and social interactions. 4) Friendship 5) Psychological health 6) Negative impacts.

Conclusions:

This study shows that pets can have socially facilitating effects such as the promotion of social integration and friendships in autistic children and therefore shows 'protective' effects, buffering against social isolation and loneliness. This study furthers our understanding of pet attachment in relation to autistic children from the perspective of their caregivers, and the impact on social inclusion and mental health.