

'He's practising his learned social skills on the cat': Parental perspectives of the role of pets in autistic children's social skills and wellbeing.

Objectives: Evidence suggests that autistic children spend less time engaging in social interactions and initiating social contact than their neurotypical peers. There is a need for research to consider how to enhance social relationships among autistic children. A solution which has received limited research attention is the role of pets and the human-pet bond to promote social inclusion and wellbeing. This study aimed to investigate this from the perspective of parents.

Method: Using a mixed-method design, parents of autistic children (n=65) completed questionnaires assessing their child's relationship with their pet cat or dog, peer relationships, prosocial behaviours, and wellbeing. Open-ended questions relating to pet ownership were also completed. This approach allowed for quantitative analysis as well as providing participants with the opportunity to describe their lived experience.

Findings: Regression analysis showed that children who engaged in more positive behaviour with their pet were more likely to demonstrate more prosocial behaviour towards others ($\beta = .38$ $p < .001$). No significant results were found in relation to pet relationships and the child's wellbeing. Despite this, thematic analysis of the opened-ended questions showed that parents believed pets had a positive impact upon their child's emotion regulation, feelings of comfort, friendship, social modelling, and interaction.

Conclusions: The study suggests that from the perspectives of parents, pets promote social interaction and prosocial behaviour in autistic children. Parents also believed that pets improved emotion regulation and feelings of comfort in their child. These findings have implications for interventions aimed at enhancing social inclusion among autistic children.

