

# Pet dogs may improve social-emotional development in young children

6 July 2020



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Young children from dog-owning households have better social and emotional wellbeing than children from households who do not own a dog, suggests research published in the journal *Pediatric Research*.

A team of researchers at the University of Western Australia and Telethon Kids Institute utilised questionnaire data from 1,646 households that included children aged two to five years. The researchers found that, after taking into account children's age, biological sex, sleep habits, [screen time](#) and parents' education levels, children from dog-owning households were 23% less likely to have overall difficulties with their emotions and social interactions than children who did not own a dog. Children from dog-owning households were 30% less likely to engage in antisocial behaviours, 40% less likely to have problems interacting with other children, and were 34% more likely to engage in considerate behaviours, such as sharing.

Associate Professor Hayley Christian, the corresponding author said: "While we expected

that [dog ownership](#) would provide some benefits for young children's wellbeing, we were surprised that the mere presence of a family dog was associated with many positive behaviours and emotions."

Among children from dog-owning households, those who joined their family on dog walks at least once per week were 36% less likely to have poor social and [emotional development](#) than those who walked with their family dog less than once per week. Children who played with their family dog three or more times per week were 74% more likely to regularly engage in considerate behaviours than those who played with their dog less than three times per week.

Associate Professor Hayley Christian said: "Our findings indicate that dog ownership may benefit children's development and wellbeing and we speculate that this could be attributed to the attachment between children and their [dogs](#). Stronger attachments between children and their pets may be reflected in the amount of time spent playing and walking together and this may promote social and emotional development."

To examine children's social and emotional development and its possible association with [family dog ownership](#), the authors analysed data collected between 2015 and 2018 as part of the Play Spaces and Environments for Children's Physical Activity (PLAYCE) study. During the study, parents of children aged between two and five years completed a questionnaire assessing their child's [physical activity](#) and social-emotional development. . Out of the 1,646 households included in the study, 686 (42%) owned a dog.

The authors caution that due to the observational nature of the study they were not able to determine the exact mechanism by which dog ownership may benefit social and emotional development in young children, or to establish cause and effect. Further research should assess the potential influence of

owning different types of pets or the influence that [children](#)'s attachment to their pets may have on child development.

**More information:** Elizabeth J. Wenden et al, The relationship between dog ownership, dog play, family dog walking, and pre-schooler social–emotional development: findings from the PLAYCE observational study, *Pediatric Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1038/s41390-020-1007-2](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41390-020-1007-2)

Provided by Springer

APA citation: Pet dogs may improve social-emotional development in young children (2020, July 6) retrieved 26 November 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-pet-dogs-social-emotional-young-children.html>

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