

Examining human-animal relationships in foster homes in the United States: What are the benefits and the challenges for children, foster parents and animals?

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Research Gap & Questions

- 71% of Americans live with pets (APPA, 2024-2025).
- Estimate 80% to 90% foster homes in the USA have pets.

In the USA, foster care is highly utilized when children cannot live with their family.

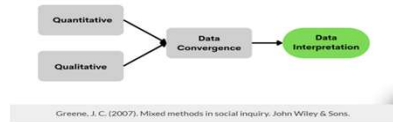
- Research gap: lack of evidence about the experiences of foster children and parents and pets in the foster care home.**
- Two studies conducted by Carr and Rockett (2017)

Study Questions

- What roles do foster family pets play in the emotional and daily lives of foster children beyond attachment functions?
- What pet, parent and child factors may influence these roles?

Design & Methods

Concurrent Triangulation Design. QUAL and QUAN Methods used simultaneously to offset weakness of each method. Areas of convergence and discrepancy highlighted. QUAL data gather via interviews; simultaneous QUAN data gathered through surveys



Greene, J. C. (2007). Mixed methods in social inquiry. John Wiley & Sons.

A pilot study with parents recruited from a **Treatment foster care agency**

19 surveys; 6 were interviewed
The survey was revised for the study, and interview guide remained the same.

Final Study

Participants were recruited from the **National Foster Parent Association (NFPA)**.

48 usable internet enabled surveys out of 59:

8 individuals who completed the survey were interviewed on the phone

Measures & Methods

Survey (n=48): univariate, bivariate & regression analyses

- Pediatric Symptom Checklist-17 (mental health);
- Comfort from Companions Animal Scale (revised for parent perspective of child and for the parent);
- Ten Item commitment to pet scale;
- Number of pets in the home, history with pets, number of foster children in home, foster child's history with animals;
- Animal harm by the child and harm to the child by animal;
- Demographic questions;
- Open-ended questions

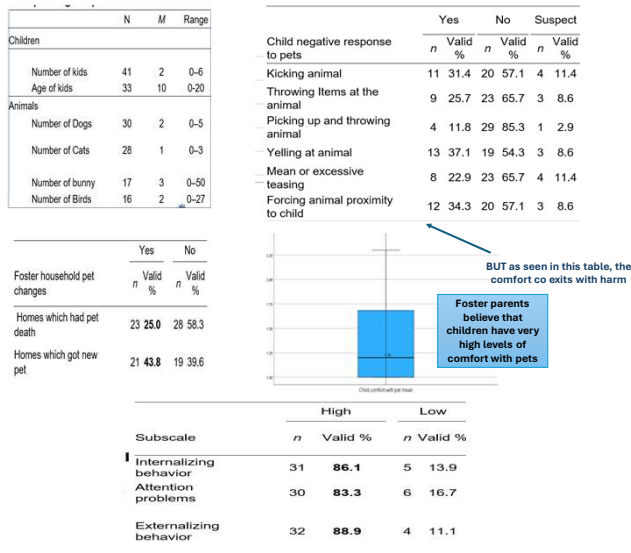
Interviews: 6 pilot 8 study

- Length of time fostering
- History with animals
- Animal-child interactions
- Conducted on the phone or zoom

Thematic Analysis Braun & Clarke

- Repeated reading by both researchers; draft codes created
- No a priori theory was used in coding segments of text
- Codes applied to text segments using Dedoose platform
- Through discussion and tools in Dedoose, the 20+ codes were clustered into six themes about the roles that pets play in the foster home
- Member checking with foster parents and foster care professionals

Quantitative Findings



Qualitative Findings

Roles Pets Can Play in a Foster Home

Connectors and bridges	Mitigate the strangeness of a new home; can connect over the pet
Teachers, coaches, models & companions	Model empathy, coach children to responsibility, reward with affection and spend time being with the child
Objects of attachment & comfort	Proximity-seeking behaviors and referral to pet as "safe place", nonjudgemental
Therapists	Seek proximity when distressed to emotionally regulate, help with fine and gross motor skills
Casualties	Emotional dysregulation of the child can harm animal; deliberate acts of cruelty rate but re enactment of trauma on animal occurs
Agents with free will and intentions	Animals are active participants in choosing how and when to engage and how to respond

Limitations

- Foster parent perspective
 - Not residential care
- No animal or child observations
- United States
- Modest sample size
- Convenience sample of parents in an advocacy group
- Humancentric perspective

Synthesis

Respect and mutuality between species is critical for children in out of home care and the pets to thrive



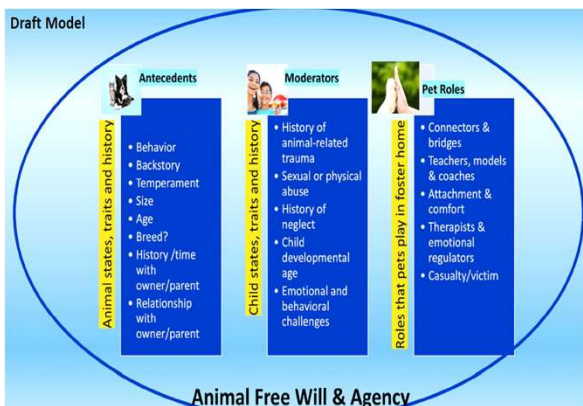
Research

- Replicate study with a larger sample and include young adults and children
- International sample

Practice

- Compare with residential experience with pets
- Collaborate with partners to create a training for children & foster parents and residential care staff

Draft Model



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