

The Role of Pets in the Social Networks of Children, Adolescents and Elderly People

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Pets are widely believed to provide socially supportive functions for their owners. However the nature of these functions may differ between ages of pet owners. This study examined the functions served by pet ownership to three age groups of pet owners: children, adolescents and elderly people.

Subjects were 20 child pet owners, aged 8-9 years; 19 adolescent pet owners aged 15-19 years and 18 elderly pet owners aged 65+ years. All subjects were interviewed individually.

Subjects were asked to list a free choice of all relationships (human or animal) important to them, and then select the ten most important relationships. Inclusion of pets in the second selection was noted. The second part of the interview comprised four illustrated stories in which a person was shown to need support. These scenarios were based on four of Weiss's (1974) 'categories of relational provisions' – reliable alliance; opportunity for nurturance; emotional loneliness; and self-esteem. After each scenario had been described, subjects were asked 'If the person in the story was you, who would you choose?' The subsequent selection was then given a rank of two as second choice. This continued until either all the ten relationships had been selected or the subject said there was no-one else they would select for that function. Ranks for human and pet relationships selected to fulfill each supportive function was compared across the three age groups.

Results showed a significantly smaller percentage of adolescents (36%) selected a pet in their ten most important relationship than children (95%) or older people (98%) ($\chi^2=26.49$, $df=2$, $p<0.001$). Of adolescent subjects who selected pets amongst their ten most important relationships, pets were nominated for one role only, the opportunity to show nurturance.

In contrast pets were selected for all functions in both the older group and the child group. Pets were most selected as something to show nurturance towards (70% of children 65% of older people). Older people were more likely than children to nominate a pet as alleviating emotional loneliness (45% vs 20%) and as providing a sense of reliable alliance (45% vs 30%). Rankings were similar for pets across all scenarios for the older group and the child group, but the adolescent group differed significantly from both across all scenarios ($p<0.001$)

Dogs and cats were most frequently selected as one of the most important relationships. Comparisons of pet type for support function indicate that dogs were most nominated for showing nurturance towards, while cats provided greater esteem support to their owners.

This study demonstrates that pet ownership may have different support benefits to different ages of pet owners.