

What is the impact of pet ownership and pet therapy on the mental health of young people and their pets around the world?

Introduction

This proposal was co-created by young people with lived experience of mental health aged 14-21 and mental health researchers/clinicians through the Youth LIVES (Youth Lived experience of Evidence Synthesis). Youth LIVES was funded through the UKRI funded Citizen Science Collaboration award and ran 2021 to 2024.

The purpose of this proposal is to share the priorities and ideas of young people with the research community, with a hope that these ideas are taken forward and youth voices embedded in future mental health research. Please feel free to use the ideas presented here to support future research bids, however we would just ask that you let the Youth LIVES team know, and acknowledge the Youth LIVES project in any bids and published papers/public outputs. Additionally, we would strongly recommend the use of participatory approaches with young people in future research inspired by these proposals, and can share details of your project with the young people involved in Youth LIVES if you are interested in working with them.

You can get in touch with the Youth LIVES team by emailing youthlives-project@york.ac.uk.

Background and Significance of the Research

There are limited studies on the effect of pet ownership, especially focusing on young people and the mental health of their pets. There is limited research about how human presence impacts pets and there are no comparisons on how this differs from animal to animal or even breed to breed. There is particularly limited research on the impact of less common pets like reptiles or rodents.

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Vision

This proposal addresses the need to better understand the impact of pet ownership on the mental health of young people. While prior research has provided mixed results relating to efficacy, particularly in terms of the effectiveness of animal-assisted therapy, the potential benefits of pet ownership remain underexplored, especially in relation to how it affects both young people and their pets.

The purpose of this research is to investigate how pet ownership influences the mental well-being of young people, aged 12-25, and their pets. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys, interviews, and focus groups with a range of participants, including young people, pet owners, vets, and non-pet individuals as a control group. Additionally, a systematic review will synthesise knowledge on the health and well-being of pets in relation to their owners. By consolidating findings from both perspectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how pets and their owners affect each other's mental health.

Literature and Knowledge Review

We conducted a rapid review of the literature to explore the extent of the impact of pet ownership and pet therapy on the mental health of young people and the pets, which was limited by Randomised Controlled Tests. We found 1940 records which were reduced by title and abstract followed by full-text screening to 20 relevant studies. The majority of the included studies (17) examined animal assisted therapy, usually as a short-term method of reducing stress, distress or anxiety such as that provoked by a dental procedure. However, two studies examined its effect on long term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms, two others looked at its effect on the mental health of those suffering from long term health conditions, and one looked at its effect on the diagnostic status of various mental health conditions. The findings were mixed on these studies, with no clear pattern as to their effectiveness. Three studies did have a focus on pets however. Carlisle (2021) looked at cat adoption and the effect on the family, and the child. The authors recruited 15 families and randomised 8 into cat adoption. The adoption seemed to have some effect on the children after 18 weeks and the families reported strong bonds with the cats. Kertes (2017) and Kerns (2018) both looked at the effect of pet presence at reducing social stress on children. Both studies indicated a potential link between lower stress and the presence of the child's pet. Other significant papers by Boa and Schreer (2016), Brooks et al. (2018), Grajfoner et al. (2021), and Lass Hennemann et al. (2022) are also important to be noted here.

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Method

The proposed methods for this research have been co-written by youth co-researchers and mental health researchers. These have been separated into work packages as follows:

- Work Package 1: Surveys, interviews, and focus groups to investigate the impact of pet ownership on the mental health of young people
- Work Package 2: Synthesis of knowledge on impact of pet ownership on animal health
- Work Package 3: Consolidation and comparison/ bringing together of previous WPs

Work Package 1: Surveys, interviews, and focus groups to investigate the impact of pet ownership on the mental health of young people

WP1 aims to understand the impact of pet ownership on the mental health of young people first through conducting surveys and selective interviews, and then deep dives through focus groups with young people aged 12-25, and with those who interact with young people and animals. This WP takes a qualitative approach, using semi structured interviews and focus groups to ensure accessibility. With this data, we will conduct a narrative analysis to answer key questions:

- How does pet ownership impact young people?
- What can we learn from real accounts of experiences?
- What do young people consider the impact of owning pets on their own mental health to be?
- How does your pet make you feel? Are you more or less stressed? Why do you think your pet makes you feel this way?
- How does ownership of multiple pets impact young people?
- What is the specific impact of pet ownership on people who are neurodivergent?
- Are there differences in the impact of pets in different cultures?
- What are the demographic trends in impacts of pet ownership?

Participants will include:

- Vets/animal professionals
- Secondary school age children and young adults
- Pet owners and those who live in a home with pets and young people
- Other young people who self select that their mental health has been affected by a pet (positive and negative, and not necessarily their own pet)
- People who have working pets too eg) Guide dogs, sheep dogs

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- Non-pet individuals as a control group
- Diverse audiences - how to reach them.
- Those who work in rescue settings

Focus groups will last 2 hours and will involve 10 people discussing the questions above. We will conduct 10 of these focus groups, and participants will be remunerated for their time with a £25 voucher.

Findings from this WP would be shared through creative and accessible outputs such as through theatre where the humans and pets are both acted out and the audience can talk to the pet about how it feels to have an owner. We would also look to share findings in creative methods appropriate for our participants such as through arts, drama, storytelling, podcasts, and collages. We would also seek to publish findings in an academic journal.

Work Package 2: Synthesis of knowledge on the impact of pet ownership on animal health

The aim of WP2 is to understand the impact of pet ownership on the health of pets through a systematic review and synthesis of the literature on how animals feel when around owners.

This will be done by applying a search strategy to both grey literature and academic literature. Terms for the search strategy would be decided upon based on the findings on WP1, but would include; domestic animals/pets, wellbeing, young people, young adults. Both qualitative and quantitative data will be reviewed, looking at animal health/feelings: physical changes and facial expressions and behaviours.

We will use various databases and google scholar, and will share findings through journals, blogs, video, conference presentations, and ensure we share them with WP1 participants.

Work Package 3: Consolidation and comparison/ bringing together of previous WPs

The aim of WP3 is to consolidate and compare, or bring together the findings of WP 1 and WP 2 to understand the impact of pet ownership on the mental health of both people and their animal companions. This will be done through an end of project workshop to map findings and answer the following questions:

- How do animals affect the mental health of young people?
- What are these effects?
- How are the benefits different from other interventions?
- By what mechanism in both animals and humans does this happen?
- Does the behaviour of different animals affect people differently?
- Do different breeds of animals have different effects?

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- How do pets impact the mental health of each other

This workshop will showcase the findings of WP1 and 2, and bring together all stakeholders involved in this work.

Overall findings will be shared through a documentary, using creative methods to facilitate conversations between humans and animals. The audience for this output would be pet owners, professionals and experts that are associated with pets and domestic animals, as well as healthcare professionals that work with young people.

Evaluation

The impact of this project would be:

- To inform the academic and professional communities on the impact of pets on mental health to inform policy and recommendations
- To contribute to the existing literature on the impact of pets on mental health
- To raise awareness of the impact of pets and domestic animals, as well as the impact of humans on pets lives
- To encourage further research in this area, for example the effect of wildlife on mental health in young people.

We will measure this impact through surveys conducted with the audience of both theatre and documentary outputs.

Communication of findings

Dissemination plans have been listed earlier, but would include a documentary and a theatre performance, alongside academic papers. We would share the findings and outputs with various stakeholders, including but not restricted to:

- Generation Scotland mental health youth forum and mental health conferences.
- Royal College of Vets school.
- Rural Mental Health Forum for Scotland
- Health and Wellbeing Network.
- Pet forums on social media
- Veterinary clinics and pet care organisations

Ethical Considerations

Data will be treated carefully. For questionnaires each participant will be assigned a number or initials and their response anonymised to protect personal information. For focus groups we will use dynamic consent, so that people can choose if their input is anonymised or if they want their name attributed to their comments. Data will not be shared without participant consent.

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Additionally, we may be interacting with young and vulnerable groups on a sensitive topic, therefore we will ensure safeguarding training for all researchers involved. We will ensure that people are supported whilst taking part, especially as some may have negative or upsetting experiences with pets. We will do this by including details about support websites and numbers for individuals who may still be grieving a pet or where the findings may be emotional for them. We need to ensure that participants are fully informed about the study's purpose and potential emotional impacts.

Risk Mitigation

Risks	Mitigations
Potential for new research avenues to distract	Appoint a research manager to keep team on track
If people have recently lost a pet or if someone has been hurt by an animal - it could be triggering	Providing support websites and numbers for people to contact for help
That there is too much data for the systematic literature review	To be rigorous and selective in our early search enquiries

Team Capability

The team that has put this proposal together consists of Youth LIVES participants which are: 5 youth co-researchers aged 15-23 years old (at the start of the project in 2022) from a diverse range of backgrounds and demographics. Additionally, 3 mental health researchers worked with the youth co-researchers to co-produce this work, and 5 members of the core Youth LIVES team who have experience across Citizen Science, Mental Health, and Knowledge Mobilisation facilitated this process.

Youth co-researchers and co-researchers have specific experience of:

- Pet ownership
- Pet grief
- Psychology education
- Pet ownership during COVID19 pandemic
- Positive and negative experiences of pet ownership
- Supporting youth mental health forums
- Rural mental health forums

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Final Comments

As a reminder, please feel free to use the ideas presented here to support future research bids, we would just ask that you let the Youth LIVES team know, and acknowledge the Youth LIVES project in any bids and papers published. Additionally, we would strongly recommend the use of participatory approaches with young people in future research inspired by these proposals, and can share details of your project with the young people involved in Youth LIVES if you are interested in working with them.

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