



# Pet Dog Ownership Decisions for Parents of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder<sup>1</sup>

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## Key words:

Autism;  
Pets;  
Children;  
Dogs;  
Human–animal interaction

This study aimed to examine the role of pet dogs in families of children with autism. Sixty-seven percent of families owned dogs and 94% reported that their children were bonded to their dogs. Parents described previous experience with dogs and beliefs in their benefits as influential in their dog ownership decision-making process. Children living with dogs interacted with them in play and/or sharing personal space. Sensory issues of the children impacted their interaction with dogs inside and outside the home. Time and cost of care were identified burdens of dog ownership. Benefits were the opportunity to learn responsibility and companionship.

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THE DIAGNOSIS OF autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is marked by deficits with communication and social skills, along with the presence of restrictive and repetitive behaviors, and symptoms range from mild to severe (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The widely heterogeneous symptomology of those with ASD has led to a variety of approaches for addressing the challenges of individual children. Pet dogs are common among families of typically developing children, and this type of human animal interaction may play a unique role for children with ASD.

## Theoretical Framework

Human–animal interaction has been examined through the lens of attachment theory, which was first proposed by Bowlby (1960). Attachment theory describes the bond of infants to their mothers for comfort and security (Bowlby, 1961), and has been further advanced to provide an understanding of the transfer of that attachment by children

to bonds with other family members and peers over time as the children develop (Ainsworth, 1989). Melson (1990) applies attachment theory to describe children's relationships to their pets. This attachment includes the relationship components of spending time together, interacting together and the children's thoughts about the relationship (Melson, 1990). The activities of playing and caring for their pets have been associated with stronger bonds to their pets, for typically developing children (Melson, Peet, & Sparks, 1991). Children describe their pets as members of the family, sources of security and as friends (Triebenbacher, 1998). The strength of these human animal relationships may play a role in the outcome of the interactions. School aged children who were more attached to their pets were found to demonstrate greater empathy with others (Daly & Morton, 2006; Poresky, 1996). Less is known about the relationships and interactions between children with ASD and pets; however, there has been an increase in the use of trained dogs with children with ASD through animal assisted therapy (AAT) and the use of service dogs.

Children with ASD exhibit a common deficit in the ability to establish social relationships. The ability to establish a secure attachment with a dog may increase the ability of these children to seek social relationships with others (Carlisle, 2012). Studies to date suggest the presence of social benefits from the interaction and relationship with

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specially trained dogs, indicating a possibility of similar benefits for children with ASD and their pet dogs.

## Literature Review

Children with ASD have been identified as having the ability to form secure attachments; however, they may be less organized attachments than those of typically developing children (Naber et al., 2007). The ability to form a strong attachment with a primary caregiver, may impact the potential for the development of friendships with peers (Bauminger, Solomon, & Rogers, 2010). The difficulty children with ASD demonstrate in establishing relationships has been described as related to a deficit in theory of mind, which is the inability to comprehend the thoughts of others (Bar-On & Cohen, 1995). Dogs lack the complex facial features and body language common to humans. It has been proposed that the lack of necessity to identify what a dog may be thinking, in order to have a social interaction, may provide a rationale for the ability of children with ASD to interact with dogs (Solomon, 2012). Cortisol, the biological indicator of stress, has been found to be increased when children with ASD interact with peers (Corbett, Schupp, Simon, Ryan and Mendoza, 2010), yet decreased when children with ASD have been paired with a service dog (Viau et al., 2010). The calming effect may aid children with ASD in developing relationships with dogs. Studies investigating the interaction of trained dogs and children with ASD have been conducted.

The benefit of the inclusion of dogs as a therapeutic aid in the psychological counseling of typically developing children is not a novel concept (Levinson, 1962). The investigation of children with ASD and dogs is less established. A meta-analysis of studies investigating AAT found that its use was associated with moderate effect sizes for improving the behavioral symptoms of children with ASD, and dogs were identified as the type of animals consistently associated with benefits (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). In one study, when compared to a stuffed dog or toy ball, the presence of a live dog during a therapy session was associated with increased conversational engagement and focused eye gaze for children with pervasive developmental disorder, which is a form of ASD (Martin & Farnum, 2002). Another study conducted during occupational therapy sessions found that when a therapy dog was present, children with ASD had increased social interactions ( $p < .01$ ), when compared to sessions with no dog (Sams, Fortney, & Willenbring, 2006). In the case of service dogs, benefits have also been found. Following receipt of a service dog in their home, children with ASD have been shown to have significantly fewer problem behaviors ( $n = 42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), than before the arrival of the dog (Viau et al., 2010). Problem behaviors may be an important factor in the development of relationships. A study of 109 children found that greater

numbers of problem behaviors predicted poorer total social skills ( $\beta = .96$ ,  $p < .01$ ) (Matson, Hess, & Mahan, 2013). In another study, children who received a service dog, compared to a control group that did not receive a dog, had significant increases in social reciprocity ( $N = 20$ ,  $p < .02$ ) (Wild, 2012). In an additional study ( $N = 10$ ), parents reported decreased levels of anxiety in their children, with increased overall happiness, following placement of a service dog in their home (Burrows, Adams, & Millman, 2008). Typically, the consistent characteristics of these trained dogs include a calm temperament and obedient behavior. The characteristics of pet dogs are more widely variable; however, benefits have been identified for typically developing children, including close relationships and attachment to their dogs.

The arrival of a pet has been associated with an increase in interactions among family members and greater family happiness, in families of typically developing children (Cain, 1985). Preschool and school age children ( $N = 174$ ) credited their pets with acting as emotional supports and social catalysts (Triebenbacher, 1999). When compared with children who did not live with a pet, children living with a pet were found to have increased levels of self-esteem, social competence and empathy (Daly & Morton, 2006; Endenburg & van Lith, 2011). This support extends through the transitional periods of development, which are often difficult for children. Dogs may serve as a confidant during these periods, with one study finding that children seek out their dogs for comfort and may be more likely to share confidences with their dog than with a friend or family member (McNicholas & Collis, 2000). Although a variety of pets are acknowledged, 51% of children ( $N = 213$ ) identified dogs as their favorite pet, while 27% named cats (Bryant, 1990). These reported experiences among typically developing children demonstrate consistent benefits related to their relationships with pets.

Only one study of children with ASD and pet ownership has been found in the literature. In that study, two groups of children were examined. One group of children ( $n = 8$ ) who had always lived with a pet was compared with a control group of children ( $n = 8$ ) who had never lived with a pet. The second group of children ( $n = 12$ ) included those children who lived with a pet that was acquired after the children were aged five, compared with a control group of children ( $n = 12$ ) who had never lived with a pet (Grandgeorge et al., 2012). In the first group of children always living with a pet, 50% of the children had tactile interactions with one of their pets, but none of the children were reported by parents to play with or care for their pets, and only two were described as having a privileged relationship with their pets. In the second group of children who acquired their pet after the age of 4 to 52 years, 75% of the children had tactile interactions, 58% played with their pet, 50% cared for their pet, and 58% were described as having a privileged relationship with their pet. Six of the families in this second group acquired their pet specifically for their child with ASD. The pets included dogs,

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