



# One of the family? Measuring early adolescents' relationships with pets and siblings



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## ABSTRACT

Pets are common but their importance to children and early adolescents has received scant empirical attention. This is partly due to a lack of tools for measuring child-pet relationships. The first aim of the present study (involving 77 12-year-olds) was to evaluate a pet adaptation of an established measure of human relationship quality, the Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI). Next, we applied the NRI to examine how pet relationship quality varies with pet type and participant's gender, and to compare participants' relationships with pets and with siblings. Results showed that girls reported more disclosure, companionship, and conflict with their pet than did boys, while dog owners reported greater satisfaction and companionship with their pet than did owners of other pets. Highlighting the importance of early adolescents' pet relationships, participants derived more satisfaction and engaged in less conflict with their pets than with their siblings.

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## 1. Introduction

Accompanying the growth of research on family influences on children's development (Caster, Inderbitzen, & Hope, 1999; Kazdin, French, Unis, & Esveldt-Dawson, 1983; Lee & McLanahan, 2015) are two themes: (i) the inclusion of a broad network of relationships rather than a restricted focus on parent-child interactions; and (ii) the adoption of methods designed to capture a child's eye view of family life. Echoing these themes, the current study was designed to compare early adolescents' reports of their relationships with siblings and with pets. In doing so, our aim was to address an almost uncharted aspect of family life and to establish the psychometric utility of a recognized child questionnaire, the Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI) (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985a), as an instrument for future research on the role of pets in lives of early adolescents.

In Western households pets are nearly as common as siblings: in the UK for example, just under than three quarters (74%) of families with a 10-year-old child also own a pet (Westgarth et al., 2010). Moreover, many people, young and old, consider pets to be members of their family (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Cain, 1985; Melson, 2001). Pets may be especially significant to young people, aiding them in their social and emotional development (Cain, 1985) by providing opportunities to acquire skills such as empathy, responsibility, and caretaking (Legg, Sherick, &

Wadland, 1974; Poresky, 1990; Robin & Bensel, 1985). Children and early adolescents report strong emotional bonds with their pets (Kidd & Kidd, 1985; Melson, 1988), spontaneously list pets when asked to name close friends and providers of social support (Bryant, 1985), and rely on their pets as playmates and confidants (McNicholas & Collis, 2001).

In fact, pets often fulfill the four roles of an attachment figure proposed by Mary Ainsworth (1989). Specifically, many pet owners report that their pets are enjoyable, and comforting (Bonas, McNicholas, & Collis, 2000), missed when absent (Archer & Winchester, 1994; Kurdek, 2009a), and sought out in times of distress (Kurdek, 2009b). This may make human-pet relationships particularly important during adolescence as teens move away from reliance on their parents and siblings and towards alternative attachment figures such as romantic partners, peers (Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997), and potentially pets (Robin & Bensel, 1985). In keeping with this idea, time caring for pets, which has in turn been associated with strong pet attachment (Kurdek, 2008, 2009b), is typically higher for children with working mothers or without younger siblings (Melson, 1988). Likewise, people with histories of family dysfunction and impaired attachment have been reported to turn to their pets to satiate their need for love and support (Rynearson, 1978).

Given their non-judgmental and unrestrictive nature, pets may be especially well suited to fulfilling people's need to feel autonomous and competent (Archer, 1997), two of the major goals of adolescence (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Perhaps because of this, pet ownership has been associated with higher self-esteem among young adolescents (Covert, Whiren, Keith, & Nelson, 1985). Likewise, as pets are inherently non-judgmental they may also be a valuable resource for communication,

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particularity for people who are low in self-disclosure (Kurdek, 2009a). This too may make pets especially important during early adolescence, a period characterized by high self-consciousness (Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973), and low self-disclosure (Papini, Farmer, Clark, Micka, & Barnett, 1990). This may also mean that pets are particularly valuable to boys, as young adolescent boys report significantly less disclosure than their female peers (Papini et al., 1990). In fact, young adolescents do report turning to their pets when feeling sad (Covert et al., 1985), and children (McNicholas & Collis, 2001), young adults (Kurdek, 2009a), and adults (Kurdek, 2009b) have all reported being more likely to turn to their dogs as sources of support during times of emotional distress than to almost any of their close human relationships. This is particularly meaningful as during adolescence greater communication in general is associated with positive social adjustment and wellbeing (Segrin, 2005), and poor communication is linked to negative outcomes (Miller, King, Shain, & Naylor, 1992).

Adolescence can be an emotionally tumultuous time and a peak period of onset for a number of psychological and behavioral problems such as depression (Petersen et al., 1993; Thapar, Collishaw, Pine, & Thapar, 2012), anxiety (Kashani & Orvaschel, 1990), eating disorders (Gonzalez, Clarke, & Kohn, 2007), and self-harm (Nock, 2010). Studies of adolescents have shown that high quality sibling relationships predict lower rates of internalizing (e.g., symptoms of anxiety and depression) and externalizing problems (e.g., conduct problems) (Buist, Deković, & Prinzie, 2013), and enhanced social competence (Pike, Coldwell, & Dunn, 2005). Likewise, social support in early adolescence is predictive of later psychological wellbeing (van Harmelen et al., 2016). The idea that people could also derive social support from their pets (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002) is consistent with the emerging consensus regarding the importance of the wider family environment for individual differences in young people's resilience (e.g., Afifi & MacMillan, 2011; Bowes et al., 2009; Saltzman et al., 2011). Moreover, the benefits of human-animal interaction (HAI) have been found to be most pronounced for people who exhibit especially high stress responses (Havener et al., 2001), or those with low levels of human social support (Garrity, Stallones, Marx, & Johnson, 1989). Thus animals are increasingly involved in therapeutic settings (Altschiller, 2011; McNicholas & Collis, 2006). Separate studies have shown that the presence of a dog was associated with reduced markers of stress in children undergoing physical examinations (Nagengast, Baun, Megel, & Leibowitz, 1997) or visiting the dentist (Havener et al., 2001).

It should also be recognized, however, that just as the frequency of pet ownership varies among different demographic groups – families with fewer or older children, working mothers, two resident parents, and higher incomes all report higher frequency of pet ownership (Melson, 1988) – so too does the strength of people's attachment to their pets. For example, closer relationships with pets and greater reliance on pets for emotional support have been reported among males (Kurdek, 2009b), and owners of dogs relative to owners of other animals (Archer, 1997; Bonas et al., 2000; Siegel, 1990). Pets can also be an extra burden requiring time, money, and energy, as well as a source of bereavement, and even conflict as young owners sometimes act out their aggressions on their pets, use pets as a way of asserting dominance over something, or simply fight over whose turn it is to interact with or take care of their pet (for review see Robin & Bense, 1985). Thus, as with human-human relationships, it is important to consider the *quality* of the relationship because individual differences in the human-animal bond predict owners' health and wellbeing (Garrity et al., 1989; Headey, Na, & Zheng, 2008).

Yet despite their ubiquity and reported importance to young people, the actual impact of the quality of children's relationships with their pets and how this compares with other relationships and social influences are both poorly understood (Melson, 2011). One key obstacle is the lack of psychometrically validated instruments for measuring these relationships (Melson, 2011). While measures of human-animal relationship quality do exist (for review see Anderson, 2007), they typically comprise items that are specific to HAI and have yet to be

scrutinized from a psychometric perspective. An obvious starting point is therefore to consider whether measures designed to assess the quality of other family relationships, which have received significant psychometric attention (e.g., Boer, Westenberg, McHale, Updegraff, & Stocker, 1997; Carlson & Sroufe, 1995; DeCato, Donohue, Azrin, Teichner, & Crum, 2002; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985a, 1985b), might also be applied to assess variation in children's relationships with pets.

Adopting this integrative approach, the first aim of the present study was to evaluate the suitability of the NRI, a widely used measure of family relationships (for review see Furman, 1996), for assessing child-pet relationships. Developing a pet attachment scale adapted from an established and psychometrically validated measure of human attachment would not only address recent calls to improve the methodological rigor of research on HAI (Melson, 2011), but would also enable direct comparison of these relationships. Moreover, examining the extent to which the same set of questions can be applied to both human-human and human-animal relationships is a key first step in investigating the structural comparability of these two types of relationship.

At a functional level, young adolescents' relationships with pets and siblings may be particularly comparable. Siblings and pets are both considered family members, typically reside within the home, and are dependent upon parents. Moreover, whereas caregiving and support are the primary functions of the parent-child relationship (Bowlby, 2008), companionship is one of the key functions of children's relationships with both siblings (Bryant, 1989) and pets (Endenburg, 1995), at least in the western world. Likewise, when seeking a playmate, children are more likely to turn to siblings (McHale & Crouter, 1996) or pets (McNicholas & Collis, 2001) than to parents. As such, the present study set out to determine whether the NRI could be extended to measure early adolescents' relationships with both their pets and siblings.

It is worth noting that the current study is not the first to consider whether the NRI can be used as a tool for measuring HAI. Bonas et al. (2000) conducted principal components analysis (PCA) on a pet adaptation of the NRI, and found that, while human-pet relationships were generally positive they had fundamentally different components from human-human ones. This result calls into question the validity of comparing these different domains, and of even considering HAI in the same terms. Bonas et al. (2000) stated that these differences warranted further investigation, which we hope the present study provides by taking a different methodological approach in multiple respects.

First, whereas Bonas et al. (2000) adapted the entire NRI for use with pets, we chose to focus on scales that (i) measure horizontal aspects of the relationship (i.e., those not likely to be affected by imbalances in power in relationships) and (ii) reflect a dyadic perspective. The inclusion of subscales that are potentially less relevant to child-pet relationships may explain why their PCA results were inconsistent across relationship domains. Second, the sample for this earlier study comprised 90 participants from 40 families. Including multiple family members from the same households is problematic in at least two respects. First, family members may experience more similar environmental and genetic influences than unrelated individuals and may therefore provide similar responses (Rowe, 1983). The potentially inflated homogeneity of the sample increases the risk of finding unrepresentative trends in the psychometric properties of this previously untested instrument. Second, the mixed sample of parents and children means that findings specific to children may have gone undetected. In order to address these issues, the present study used a sample of 77 early adolescents from different households.

In sum, this paper addressed three primary research questions. First, can the quality of child-pet relationships be assessed reliably and validly using the NRI? Second, how are gender and pet species related to the quality of these relationships? And finally, do early adolescents report stronger relationships with their pets or with their siblings? Specifically, based on the literature reviewed above, we anticipated that:

1. The NRI-Pet would comprise the same factors as the NRI-Sibling.

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