

Paws and Progress: The Role of Pets in Supporting Adolescent Emotional Development

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is an important stage for emotional development because young people experience changes in identity, family relationships, peer networks, academic demands, and emotional regulation. Companion animals may provide an additional source of emotional support during this period. This paper explores the role of pets in supporting adolescent emotional development through an exploratory review of previous research. The review focuses on companion animal relationships, attachment, social support, loneliness, stress coping, self-esteem, self-efficacy, resilience, family communication, and structured animal-based programs. Existing studies suggest that supportive relationships with pets may provide companionship, emotional safety, daily structure, opportunities for caregiving, and support for social interaction. However, pet ownership alone does not consistently predict better emotional health. The quality of the adolescent-pet relationship, animal species, family environment, caregiving responsibility, and the adolescent's existing social resources may influence outcomes. Some studies also report no benefit or more complex relationships between pet ownership and loneliness, stress, or well-being. Therefore, pets should be understood as possible supportive resources rather than universal solutions to adolescent emotional difficulties. Families, schools, and mental health professionals may consider carefully planned human-animal interactions while protecting both adolescent and animal welfare. More longitudinal and culturally diverse studies are required to explain when, how, and for whom relationships with pets support healthy emotional development.



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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a period in which emotional life becomes more complex. Young people are expected to manage school demands, changing family expectations, stronger peer influence, identity development, and increasing independence. At the same time, they are learning how to recognize emotions, control emotional reactions, ask for support, maintain relationships, and recover after stressful experiences. These tasks make emotional development one of the central parts of healthy adolescent development.

Loneliness is particularly important during this stage because adolescents become more sensitive to the quality of social relationships and to whether they feel accepted by other people. Loneliness is not simply the same as being physically alone because a person can experience loneliness even when surrounded by classmates or family members. Developmental research shows that loneliness changes across the life course and may become difficult when attempts to reconnect with others are unsuccessful (Qualter et al., 2015). For adolescents, repeated experiences of social exclusion, weak friendship quality, family conflict, or major life changes may therefore affect emotional well-being.

Human relationships remain the main sources of social and emotional support for most adolescents. Parents, siblings, teachers, friends, counselors, and other trusted adults all have important roles. However, another relationship is common in many families but has received less attention in

developmental research. This relationship is the bond between young people and companion animals. Pets may live in the same home, participate in daily routines, receive care, and become involved in family activities. For some adolescents, a pet is also understood as a friend, a family member, or a safe partner for emotional expression.

Research on child development has suggested that companion animals can form part of the social environment in which children learn about caregiving, responsibility, communication, and relationships (Melson, 2003). A pet is different from a human friend because it cannot provide the same type of verbal advice, social judgment, or complex discussion. However, regular interaction with an animal can still have emotional meaning. An adolescent may sit with a dog after a difficult day, talk to a cat when feeling upset, care for an animal as part of a daily routine, or walk a dog when experiencing stress.

The value of this relationship should not be assumed simply from pet ownership. The idea that all people become healthier or happier because they own a pet has been questioned because research findings are inconsistent (Herzog, 2011). Some adolescents may have a close and supportive relationship with an animal, while others may have little interaction with the family pet. In other cases, caring for an animal can create additional work, cost, worry, conflict, or grief. Therefore, the important research question is not only whether an adolescent owns a pet. It is also necessary to ask what kind of relationship exists between the adolescent and the animal.

A systematic review of child and adolescent development found positive evidence in areas such as self-esteem and loneliness, but the findings for anxiety and depression were not clear (Purewal et al., 2017). This mixed evidence is important because it prevents an overly simple conclusion. Pets may support some emotional processes under certain conditions, but pet ownership should not be presented as a general treatment for adolescent mental health problems.

More recent research has moved from a simple ownership model toward examination of attachment, interaction, species, caregiving, and family context. A systematic review of children's bonds with companion animals reported possible positive associations with empathy, social support, and quality of life, while also finding contradictory results in several psychological outcomes (Groenewoud et al., 2023). This shift is useful because emotional development is influenced by relationships rather than by possession alone.

The same point can be seen in longitudinal evidence. A population-based study in Japan found that dog ownership at age 10 predicted a more positive pattern of mental well-being to age 12, while cat ownership showed a different pattern (Endo et al., 2020). These results do not mean that dogs are always beneficial or that cats are harmful. Instead, they demonstrate that animal species, activity patterns, family characteristics, selection effects, and relationship quality may produce different outcomes.

RESEARCH METHODS

The present paper follows an exploratory literature review approach. It does not conduct a new experiment, survey, or meta-analysis. Existing systematic reviews, longitudinal studies, cross-sectional studies, qualitative studies, theoretical papers, and research on structured animal-based programs are examined together. Priority is given to research directly involving children and adolescents, while studies of young adults are used only when they provide a useful conceptual explanation.

The exploratory approach is appropriate because the available literature uses many different definitions, age groups, animals, psychological measures, and research designs. A strict pooled estimate would not represent these differences well. The purpose is instead to organize the evidence into major emotional-development pathways and to identify both positive findings and limitations.

Four questions guide the review. First, what forms of emotional support can pets potentially provide to adolescents? Second, through which psychological and social mechanisms may these relationships influence emotional development? Third, what does current empirical research show about loneliness, stress, self-esteem, resilience, family relationships, and general emotional well-being? Fourth, under what conditions may pet relationships be supportive, neutral, or difficult for adolescents?

The paper also distinguishes ordinary pet companionship from organized animal-based activities and professionally guided interventions. This distinction is important because living with a family pet is not equivalent to participating in a professionally designed program. Evidence from

structured interventions should therefore not be used as direct proof that ordinary pet ownership produces the same emotional outcomes.

The aim of the paper is not to replace human relationships with animal relationships. Instead, pets are examined as one possible part of the wider social and emotional support system around an adolescent. The central argument is that supportive human-animal relationships may contribute to emotional development when they provide companionship, appropriate responsibility, emotional safety, social connection, and opportunities for effective coping.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Previous Research Analysis

a. Research Trends

Research on companion animals and young people's emotional development has developed across psychology, nursing, education, social work, public health, veterinary science, and human-animal interaction studies. Earlier work often asked whether pet owners differed from non-owners. Later research increasingly examined attachment quality, pet species, caregiving, stress, social context, and specific emotional outcomes. The broad developmental literature has long suggested possible roles for animals in social and emotional learning (Endenburg & van Lith, 2011). However, early studies were frequently small or cross-sectional, which made it difficult to determine whether pets caused better outcomes or whether families with particular characteristics were more likely to own pets.

Research directions in human-animal interaction therefore emphasized the need for stronger developmental designs, clearer mechanisms, and attention to both everyday and structured forms of interaction (Esposito et al., 2011). These methodological concerns remain relevant because emotional development occurs over time. A major systematic review found only a limited number of studies that met broad criteria for child and adolescent developmental outcomes (Purewal et al., 2017). Most of the included evidence was observational, and longitudinal research was uncommon.

A later systematic review focusing on child-companion animal bonds reached a similar conclusion about inconsistency and measurement problems (Groenewoud et al., 2023). Thus, the field has expanded, but the strength of evidence has not increased equally across all outcomes. The research can be organized into several recurring themes: loneliness and companionship, anxiety and stress, depression and general well-being, self-esteem and competence, empathy and prosocial development, family relationships, species differences, pet-care responsibility, and structured animal-based programs.

Table 1. Representative Studies on Pets and Adolescent Emotional Development

Study	Sample or Design	Main Focus	Main Result	Interpretation
Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995	130 participants aged 8 to 13	Self-esteem, autonomy, self-concept	Pet owners reported some higher positive self-related outcomes	Suggests possible developmental benefit, but causality is unclear
Black, 2012	293 rural adolescents aged 13 to 19	Loneliness and social support	Pet owners reported lower loneliness and pet attachment related to social support	Supports companionship pathway
Mathers et al., 2010	928 adolescents aged 13 to 19	General adolescent health	Pet ownership and time with pets were not related to better emotional health	Shows that ownership alone may not provide benefit

Study	Sample or Design	Main Focus	Main Result	Interpretation
Rhoades et al., 2015	332 homeless youth	Depression and loneliness	Pet-owning youth reported fewer depressive and loneliness symptoms	Pets may be important for vulnerable youth
(Hauge et al., 2014)	Four-month equine program with adolescents	Social support, self-esteem, self-efficacy	Some positive developmental changes were reported	Structured participation may provide mastery and relationship experiences
Cassels et al., 2017	77 adolescents around age 12	Pet and sibling relationship quality	Adolescents reported high satisfaction and relatively low conflict with pets	Pets can hold meaningful family relationship roles
Marsa-Sambola et al., 2017	2,262 Scottish adolescent pet owners	Communication, attachment, quality of life	Attachment to dogs and cats was associated with quality of life	Pet attachment may connect with broader social relationships
Muldoon et al., 2019	Large youth dataset of about 6,700 participants	Species, attachment, well-being	Dog attachment was particularly strong and related to well-being	Species and relationship quality should be separated
Endo et al., 2020	Longitudinal Tokyo Teen Cohort, 2,584 adolescents	Dog and cat ownership, well-being	Dog and cat ownership predicted different well-being patterns	Species and family context may change associations
Hartwig & Signal, 2020	283 Australian adolescents	Pet attachment and loneliness	Overall association was small, with different patterns by ownership role	Very strong attachment may not always indicate lower loneliness
Mueller et al., 2021	Longitudinal data before and during COVID-19	Loneliness and pet relationships	Pet ownership did not buffer pandemic loneliness	Context can change the meaning of pet support
Charmaraman et al., 2022a	Qualitative parent perspectives	Emotion regulation and adolescent-pet interaction	Parents described emotional comfort as well as practical challenges	Family observations show both benefits and burdens
Charmaraman et al., 2022b	567 pet-owning adolescents plus parent interviews	Pet care and family relationships	Greater care responsibility related to coping with stress and improved family relationships	Appropriate responsibility may support competence and connection
Mueller et al., 2022	6,069 adolescents from a large United States dataset	Stress and adaptive coping	Pet ownership did not buffer mental well-being, while dog ownership related to some active coping behaviors	Behavioral pathways may exist without direct symptom reduction

Study	Sample or Design	Main Focus	Main Result	Interpretation
Groenewoud et al., 2023	Systematic review of 29 studies	Child-animal bond and psychosocial health	Some positive links appeared for empathy, social support, and quality of life, but findings were inconsistent	Bond quality is important, but stronger causal evidence is needed
Moe et al., 2025	Systematic review of school-aged animal-based services	Well-being and behavior	Potential benefits were found, with substantial risk of bias	Programs are promising but require stronger trials

b. Loneliness, Companionship, and Social Connection

Loneliness is one of the most frequently discussed pathways through which pets may support adolescents. A companion animal is available in the home and may provide a sense of presence when the adolescent is physically alone. The animal can also become part of repeated routines that make periods of solitude feel more structured. Research with rural adolescents found lower loneliness among pet owners and a positive relationship between animal attachment and the size of perceived social support networks (Black, 2012). This is important because the result does not suggest that animal relationships necessarily remove human relationships. Instead, pet relationships may coexist with broader social support.

Qualitative research with homeless youth has also described animals as companions used to cope with loneliness (Rew, 2000). This finding is particularly meaningful because young people without stable housing may experience disruption in family and social relationships. A larger study of homeless youth found that pet owners reported fewer symptoms of depression and loneliness than non-owners (Rhoades et al., 2015). At the same time, having a pet may create barriers to accessing shelters or services that do not accept animals, showing that benefits and practical difficulties can occur together.

Systematic evidence on pet ownership and loneliness is mixed across age groups and social contexts. A review of pet ownership, loneliness, and social isolation found more positive patterns in some child and adolescent studies before the pandemic, but the overall literature did not support one universal effect (Kretzler et al., 2022).

One explanation for lower loneliness is that pets provide nonjudgmental companionship. Adolescents often experience concern about peer evaluation, embarrassment, or rejection. An animal cannot evaluate academic success, popularity, appearance, or social status in the same way that peers can.

However, low loneliness should not be assumed from strong pet attachment. Australian adolescents showed only a small and nonsignificant overall relationship between animal attachment and loneliness (Hartwig & Signal, 2020). A subgroup with extremely high attachment and primary ownership also showed higher loneliness and lower social support.

This result suggests at least two possible interpretations. A strong animal relationship may reduce loneliness for some adolescents, but another adolescent may turn very strongly toward a pet because human social support is already weak. Cross-sectional research cannot easily determine which process occurred first.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a natural context for examining this question under unusually high social restriction. Pet ownership did not protect adolescents from increases in loneliness during the pandemic, even though many young people reported using pets as a coping resource (Mueller et al., 2021). This shows that animal companionship may be meaningful without being strong enough to replace lost school, peer, and community relationships.

The practical implication is that pets should be considered additions to social networks rather than substitutes for them. When an adolescent is lonely, adults should not respond only by increasing time with the pet. They should also examine peer relationships, family communication, school belonging, bullying, social anxiety, and access to supportive adults.

c. Stress, Anxiety, and Emotional Regulation

Pets may support emotional regulation through touch, quiet presence, play, routine, movement, and a temporary shift of attention away from stressful thoughts. These experiences can help some adolescents move from intense emotional arousal toward a calmer state.

Parents interviewed about adolescent pet companionship frequently described pets as resources for emotional regulation and comfort (Charmaraman et al., 2022a). Parents also reported that animals could make screen time feel less socially isolated when adolescents were spending long periods online.

Physiological research provides a possible explanation for immediate calming effects. Human-animal interaction has been associated with changes in stress-related systems and oxytocin processes, although the evidence varies across populations and situations (Beetz et al., 2012b). Long-term emotional development cannot be inferred only from short-term physiological effects.

The stress-buffering model provides another explanation. A supportive relationship can change how a stressful event is experienced and can make coping resources feel more available (Cohen & Wills, 1985). A familiar animal may serve this function when the adolescent associates the animal with comfort, safety, or routine. Research with children has found lower probability of some anxiety indicators among those living with a dog, but this evidence involved younger children and did not show broad differences across all psychological outcomes (Gadomski et al., 2015). Therefore, the result is relevant to developmental pathways but should not be generalized directly to all adolescents.

Large adolescent datasets provide an even more cautious picture. During the COVID-19 pandemic, pet-owning adolescents did not show a general mental health buffering effect and reported slightly higher perceived stress in some comparisons (Mueller et al., 2022). Dog ownership was more clearly related to behaviors such as walking and spending time outdoors than to lower stress itself.

This distinction between emotional outcome and coping behavior is valuable. A pet may encourage a healthy action without immediately lowering a psychological symptom score. For example, walking a dog may provide exercise, daylight, routine, and time outside even when the adolescent still feels stressed.

A structured horse-based program provides another example of active coping and mastery. Adolescents participating in organized equine activities engaged in riding and work with horses over several months, with the study examining perceived social support, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Hauge et al., 2014). Such programs may combine animal interaction with skill learning, relationships with adults, outdoor activity, and achievement. The effectiveness of structured animal-based programs should therefore be interpreted as the result of a complete program rather than the animal alone. The professional, instructor, peer group, setting, activity, duration, and adolescent's expectations can all influence outcomes.

d. Depression and General Emotional Well-Being

Depression is one of the areas in which conclusions about pets should be particularly careful. Emotional companionship might reduce some conditions connected with depressive experiences, such as isolation or inactivity. However, depression is a complex health condition and cannot be explained by pet ownership alone. Research with homeless youth reported fewer depressive symptoms among pet owners (Rhoades et al., 2015). This association may reflect meaningful emotional support, but it may also be influenced by differences between young people who were able and unable to keep an animal.

A broad systematic review concluded that evidence regarding child and adolescent anxiety and depression was inconclusive (Purewal et al., 2017). This conclusion remains important because positive findings in loneliness or self-esteem should not be transferred automatically to depression.

General well-being findings also vary. The Tokyo longitudinal study found a more positive mental well-being pattern among dog owners while cat ownership showed a different association (Endo

et al., 2020). The authors' species-specific findings show why a single category called "pet ownership" can hide important differences.

Another population study found no clear emotional-health advantage associated with pet ownership or time spent caring for pets among adolescents (Mathers et al., 2010). Null findings such as this should be included because they reduce publication and interpretation bias. One possible explanation for different findings is selection. Families do not randomly receive pets. Housing conditions, income, family structure, culture, parental preferences, neighborhood environment, health, lifestyle, and previous experience with animals may all influence pet ownership.

Reverse direction is another problem. An adolescent with emotional difficulty may seek more contact with a pet, which could create an association between strong attachment and poorer mental health even when the animal is helping. Alternatively, a young person with good social functioning may be more active with a dog and may therefore report both strong pet attachment and high well-being. For this reason, emotional well-being research needs more repeated measurement across time. Researchers should measure the adolescent before a pet enters the home, follow the relationship as it develops, and record changes in human support, family stress, caregiving, and animal behavior.

e. Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy, and Resilience

Self-esteem was one of the more positive areas identified in early pet-development research. Young pet owners in one study reported higher self-esteem and autonomy than non-owners in some age comparisons (Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). The findings were cross-sectional, so they identify an association rather than a developmental effect. Pets may support self-esteem when adolescents experience acceptance and a valued family role. A young person who feels that an animal seeks their presence or responds positively to their care may experience a simple but meaningful sense of personal importance.

The relationship may be particularly relevant when the adolescent has few areas in which they feel competent. Successfully teaching a dog a command, learning safe horse handling, preparing food correctly, or noticing an animal's needs can provide clear feedback that effort matters. Early research on children's pet attachment found links between aspects of attachment and perceived competence at certain developmental stages (Melson et al., 1991). The age-related differences in that research also show that the same animal relationship may have different meanings as children mature.

Self-efficacy is likely to depend more strongly on active participation than on ownership. An adolescent who is never responsible for the family animal may gain companionship but little mastery. An adolescent who receives age-appropriate care responsibilities may experience repeated small successes. Recent research supports this interpretation. Adolescents reporting greater pet-care responsibility were more likely to use pets when coping with stress and also reported more positive changes in family relationships during the pandemic period (Charmaraman et al., 2022b). Responsibility may therefore connect individual competence with family cooperation.

Resilience may develop through several connected pathways. A stable animal relationship can provide routine during family change. Pet care can require action even on a difficult day. Walking, feeding, grooming, or checking an animal may create predictable tasks when other areas of life feel uncertain. Research with military-connected youth found that animal attachment was associated with adaptive coping and positive youth development in the context of parental deployment (Mueller & Callina, 2014). The finding suggests that pets can become contextual resources during periods of family stress.

The concepts of self-efficacy and resilience are also useful when considering the broader social support literature. Work with university students argues that perceived support may contribute to happiness partly through self-efficacy and resilience (Wu, 2026). Direct adolescent pet research is needed before this pathway can be confirmed for human-animal relationships. The most reasonable hypothesis is therefore not that a pet produces resilience. It is that a supportive pet relationship may offer experiences that contribute to resilience when combined with human support, manageable responsibility, opportunities for competence, and a safe family environment.

f. Family Communication, Empathy, and Prosocial Development

Pets can influence emotional development through the family. Family members may discuss feeding, exercise, health, behavior, training, and responsibility. Shared affection for an animal can also create positive moments that are not centered on school performance or conflict. A large study of Scottish adolescent pet owners found relationships among communication with significant others, attachment to pets, and quality of life (Marsa-Sambola et al., 2017). The results suggest that pet relationships may be embedded inside the adolescent's wider network of communication rather than functioning independently from it.

Pet-related interaction may also support offline and online social experiences. Research with adolescents has examined how pet companionship relates to social interaction across both settings (Charmaraman et al., 2020). This area has become more relevant as adolescents increasingly maintain relationships through digital communication.

The family can also use pet care as a context for teaching responsibility. Parents may gradually transfer appropriate tasks to adolescents while keeping adult responsibility for veterinary decisions, financial cost, and overall welfare. This allows the adolescent to practice independence without placing the full burden of animal care on them. Empathy is another possible pathway. Caring for an animal requires attention to signals that are not expressed through human language. Adolescents may learn to notice body posture, movement, appetite, energy, distance-seeking behavior, or signs of discomfort.

Research with children found associations among pet attachment, caring behavior, friendship behavior, compassion, and positive attitudes toward animals (Hawkins & Williams, 2017). The study cannot prove that pet attachment caused compassion, but it supports the idea that humane care and emotional bonds develop together. Positive youth development theory also supports attention to these everyday practices. Human-animal interaction can provide a relational setting in which young people practice responsibility and connection (Mueller, 2014a). The quality of the practice is more important than the simple presence of an animal.

Family conflict is possible as well. Parents and adolescents may disagree about who should walk the dog, clean an enclosure, pay for supplies, or manage unwanted behavior. If expectations were unrealistic when the pet was obtained, the animal can become a repeated source of arguments. This possibility reinforces the need for shared planning before a family acquires a pet. The developmental question should not be "Would a pet be good for our teenager?" A better question is "Can our family provide a stable, safe, and humane environment in which a positive relationship between the teenager and an animal can develop?"

g. Species, Attachment Quality, and Individual Differences

The literature clearly suggests that species should not be treated as a minor detail. Different animals create different forms of contact, care, communication, exercise, and social visibility. Dogs are strongly represented in adolescent research because they often participate in active interaction. Large-scale evidence suggests that young people may report stronger attachments to dogs than to some other companion animals (Muldoon et al., 2019). Dog walking may also create opportunities for exercise and social contact.

Cats may provide close companionship but usually do not produce the same outdoor routines. This may partly explain why dog and cat ownership showed different associations with well-being in longitudinal research (Endo et al., 2020). It would be incorrect to interpret these findings as an inherent mental health ranking of species. Horses are usually studied in organized activities rather than ordinary household ownership. Equine activities may combine relationship building with physical coordination, instruction, outdoor settings, and progressive mastery (Hauge et al., 2014). These combined elements make it difficult to isolate the animal effect.

The adolescent's gender, age, personality, family culture, previous animal experience, and emotional state can also influence relationships with pets. Relationship research with early adolescents found differences in disclosure and companionship by gender and species (Cassels et al., 2017). Such differences should be explored without assuming that every adolescent within a demographic category has the same preferences. Age is particularly important. As children enter later adolescence, peers, romantic relationships, school demands, employment, and independent activities may reduce time

available for pets. Large-scale research has reported that emotional connections with companion animals can weaken with age (Muldoon et al., 2019).

Attachment quality may be more important than attachment intensity. A balanced relationship allows the adolescent to care about the pet while maintaining human friendships, school participation, and appropriate independence. Extremely intense attachment may sometimes signal that the animal has become the adolescent's main or only perceived source of emotional security. Australian research provides evidence for this concern because a subgroup of primary pet owners with very high attachment also showed greater loneliness and lower social support (Hartwig & Signal, 2020). This does not mean strong pet attachment is harmful, but it indicates that professionals should look at the complete social context.

h. Structured Animal-Based Programs for Adolescents

Structured animal-based programs move beyond everyday companionship by using planned human-animal interaction toward educational, supportive, emotional, or professional goals. They are increasingly used in schools, counseling programs, hospitals, and community settings. A systematic review of structured programs for youth with mental health risks found a growing evidence base but also substantial variation across animals, interventions, outcomes, and study quality (Hoagwood et al., 2017). This makes broad claims about effectiveness difficult.

Programs involving dogs are one of the better studied adolescent applications. A systematic review found emerging evidence for symptom and treatment-engagement benefits, although only seven studies met the review criteria (Jones et al., 2019). The small evidence base means that animal involvement should be integrated into evidence-informed professional support rather than replacing it. School-based services may have broader goals than clinical programs. An animal may be included to support engagement, emotional comfort, social participation, reading, or classroom behavior. The professional role and expected outcomes should be clearly stated before a program begins.

The most recent broad review of animal-assisted services for school-aged children found potential positive effects across several outcomes, including socio-emotional functioning, but methodological risk of bias remained high (Moe et al., 2025). The findings support continued development and evaluation rather than unconditional adoption.

Programs also need to protect animal welfare. An animal that is repeatedly touched, approached, or exposed to stressful environments without sufficient rest may experience poor welfare. A program cannot be considered emotionally supportive for adolescents if the animal's signals of stress are ignored. Animal welfare can itself become part of emotional education. Adolescents can learn that a supportive relationship requires respect for boundaries, behavioral signals, rest, appropriate handling, and responsibility for another living being. This creates an opportunity to connect empathy with practical action.

2. Discussion

a. Main Findings

The reviewed research suggests that pets can play a supportive role in adolescent emotional development, but the role is conditional rather than universal. The strongest explanation is not a simple "pet effect." Instead, several pathways appear to connect a good human-animal relationship with emotional outcomes. The first pathway is companionship. An animal may provide regular presence and reduce the emotional intensity of being alone. Studies with rural adolescents and vulnerable youth provide evidence that pets can be experienced as meaningful companions during loneliness (Black, 2012).

The second pathway is emotional regulation. Touch, play, quiet interaction, and familiar routines may help adolescents manage emotional arousal. Parent reports during the pandemic described pets as useful resources for emotional regulation in everyday family life (Charmaraman et al., 2022a).

The third pathway is social support. A pet can provide a form of perceived emotional availability and can also help create human social interaction. Dogs have been shown to facilitate social contact in public settings, supporting the idea that animals can act as social bridges (McNicholas & Collis, 2000).

The fourth pathway is competence and responsibility. Appropriate caregiving gives adolescents meaningful tasks with observable consequences. This pathway is consistent with evidence connecting pet-care responsibility with coping and family relationship quality (Charmaraman et al., 2022b).

The fifth pathway is resilience. Pets can provide continuity when other parts of life are changing. Evidence from military-connected youth suggests that animal relationships may be part of adaptive coping under specific family stress conditions (Mueller & Callina, 2014).

The sixth pathway concerns empathy and prosocial learning. Caring for another living being requires attention to needs and behavior. Associations between pet attachment, compassion, and caring behavior support this developmental possibility (Hawkins & Williams, 2017).

b. Why Pet Ownership Alone Is Not Enough

One of the clearest conclusions from the literature is that ownership is too simple as a main explanatory variable. A household can report pet ownership even when the adolescent has almost no interaction with the animal. This problem may explain some inconsistent findings. A population study found no better adolescent emotional health among pet owners as a general group (Mathers et al., 2010). Such a result does not necessarily mean that close pet relationships have no value because relationship quality was not identical across owners.

The opposite problem is also possible. Strong pet attachment may be associated with good well-being in one sample and with high loneliness in a vulnerable subgroup in another sample. This variation is visible in research on Australian adolescents (Hartwig & Signal, 2020). Researchers should therefore measure at least five areas: ownership, relationship quality, interaction frequency, caregiving responsibility, and wider human social support. Species and family environment should also be included.

Longitudinal data are especially important because emotional well-being may influence the pet relationship. An adolescent who becomes anxious or socially isolated may increase time with an animal. If researchers measure only one time point, they might incorrectly conclude that strong pet attachment produced the emotional problem. The longitudinal Tokyo study represents progress because pet ownership was measured before later well-being outcomes (Endo et al., 2020). However, even longitudinal observational research cannot remove every family and selection factor.

A relational developmental approach is therefore more useful than a simple ownership approach. Adolescents and animals influence each other within family, school, peer, neighborhood, and cultural systems (Mueller, 2014a). Development is produced by relationships among these factors over time.

c. Possible Risks and Negative Conditions

A balanced review must include possible difficulties. Pets require food, space, time, training, veterinary care, cleaning, and financial resources. These needs can increase household stress if the family is not prepared. Caregiving responsibility can also become excessive. An adolescent may enjoy feeding or walking an animal but feel overwhelmed if adults expect them to manage serious behavioral or medical problems. Developmentally appropriate responsibility should therefore be different from transferring adult responsibility to a young person.

Family conflict can reduce the supportive value of the pet. Arguments about cleaning, damage, noise, schedules, or cost may cause the animal to become connected with stress. Qualitative research with parents has identified both benefits and challenges in adolescent pet companionship (Charmaraman et al., 2022a). Animal behavior is another factor. Fearful, aggressive, highly reactive, or poorly socialized animals may create stress and safety concerns. Adolescents also need education about safe interaction, especially when they interpret affection as permission to approach an animal at any time.

Allergies and physical injuries need practical consideration. These issues do not remove the possible emotional value of pets, but they show why families should not obtain an animal only because they expect a psychological benefit.

Pet illness and death can be particularly difficult. A strong bond means that loss may produce real grief. Adults should recognize adolescent grief over an animal instead of minimizing it as less important than other forms of loss.

Extremely dependent emotional relationships also need attention. If an adolescent believes that only the animal is trustworthy and increasingly withdraws from family, school, or peers, the animal relationship may be functioning within a larger social problem. Evidence that very high attachment can appear together with loneliness supports careful contextual assessment (Hartwig & Signal, 2020). Animal welfare must remain equally important. Adolescents should not be encouraged to seek comfort from an animal when the animal is showing avoidance, fear, fatigue, or stress. Positive human-animal interaction requires benefit and safety for both sides.

d. Implications for Families

Families should avoid acquiring a pet as if it were a mental health product. The decision should first consider whether the household can provide long-term care and whether family members genuinely want the animal. When a pet is already present, parents can support healthy interaction through shared routines. Adolescents can take meaningful responsibility while adults provide supervision and remain responsible for major welfare and financial decisions.

Parents can also notice how adolescents use the animal emotionally. Quietly sitting with a pet after school may be a healthy self-regulation strategy. At the same time, repeated withdrawal from all human communication requires attention beyond the pet relationship. Pet care can become an opportunity for communication rather than only a household task. Parents and adolescents may walk a dog together, discuss animal behavior, attend training, prepare an enclosure, or share decisions about care. This can provide low-pressure time for family interaction.

Families should also prepare adolescents for difficult parts of animal relationships. Illness, aging, veterinary treatment, behavior changes, and death are normal possibilities. Honest preparation can help the adolescent understand responsibility and grief.

The most useful family model is therefore shared responsibility combined with respect for the adolescent-animal bond. The family should neither force emotional closeness nor treat the pet as an unimportant object.

e. Implications for Schools and Counselors

Schools may consider structured animal-based activities when there is a clear purpose, trained staff, safety planning, and attention to animal welfare. A school dog, visiting animal program, or organized animal activity should not be introduced only because animals are popular. Programs should identify expected outcomes before implementation. For example, a school may aim to improve attendance in counseling, support calm transitions, create structured social interaction, or help students practice emotional regulation.

Students also need choice. Some adolescents are afraid of dogs, uncomfortable around animals, allergic, culturally unfamiliar with close pet relationships, or simply uninterested. Participation should not be treated as necessary for emotional development.

Mental health professionals can ask about pets during psychosocial assessment. A simple question about important relationships may reveal that an animal is a major source of comfort, responsibility, grief, or family conflict.

When an adolescent already has a strong relationship with a pet, counselors may consider how that relationship fits into coping. The pet could be part of a broader coping plan that also includes trusted people, physical activity, sleep, problem solving, and professional support when needed. Professionally guided animal-based interventions require greater structure. Reviews of youth programs suggest promising outcomes but do not provide enough evidence to replace established mental health care (Hoagwood et al., 2017). The animal should support clearly defined professional goals rather than become the entire intervention.

Programs that include dogs may be useful for some adolescents who feel uncomfortable in traditional professional settings. Existing review evidence indicates good acceptability and possible symptom benefits, but standardized intervention descriptions are still needed (Jones et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

Companion animals can become meaningful parts of adolescent emotional life. They may offer companionship, opportunities for emotional regulation, daily structure, social connection, responsibility, and experiences of competence. These functions are relevant during adolescence because young people are developing greater independence while still needing stable sources of support. The evidence does not support the claim that pet ownership automatically produces better emotional health. Some studies report lower loneliness, stronger well-being, better coping, or positive self-related outcomes, while other studies report no clear benefit. Systematic reviews therefore describe a promising but inconsistent evidence base. The quality and context of the relationship appear more important than ownership alone. Supportive attachment, regular positive interaction, appropriate care responsibility, animal species, family relationships, human social support, and animal welfare may all influence whether a pet relationship becomes emotionally helpful.

Pets should consequently be understood as supplementary developmental resources. They should not replace parents, friends, teachers, counselors, or evidence-based mental health support. Their greatest value may come from being integrated into a wider network of supportive relationships and healthy daily activities. Families can strengthen this value by providing realistic caregiving roles, respectful interaction, and adult responsibility for animal welfare. Schools and professionals can use structured animal-based programs when goals, safety, training, choice, and welfare standards are clearly established. Future research should move from the question of whether adolescents own pets toward the more useful question of how particular human-animal relationships operate over time. Longitudinal research that measures attachment quality, social support, self-efficacy, resilience, family context, and species differences can provide a clearer answer. Such research can help explain when pets truly contribute to progress in adolescent emotional development and when other forms of support are more important.

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