

New research shows why cats are more independent than dogs

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Ginger tabby cat. Credit: Public domain

Domestic cats do not generally see their owners as a focus of safety and security in the same way that dogs do, according to new research published today.

The study by animal behavior specialists at the University of Lincoln,

UK, shows that while dogs perceive their owners as a safe base, the relationship between people and their feline friends appears to be quite different.

While it is increasingly recognized that [cats](#) are more social and more capable of shared relationships than traditionally thought, this latest research shows that adult cats appear to be more autonomous – even in their social relationships – and not necessarily dependent on others to provide a sense of protection.

The research, published in the scientific journal *PLOS ONE*, was led by Professor Daniel Mills, Professor of Veterinary Behavioural Medicine at the University of Lincoln's School of Life Sciences, along with Alice Potter – who studied as a postgraduate at Lincoln and now works with the Companion Animals Science Group at the RSPCA.

Professor Mills said: "The domestic cat has recently passed the dog as the most popular companion animal in Europe, with many seeing a cat as an ideal pet for owners who work long hours. Previous research has suggested that some cats show signs of separation anxiety when left alone by their owners, in the same way that dogs do, but the results of our study show that they are in fact much more independent than canine companions. It seems that what we interpret as [separation anxiety](#) might actually be signs of frustration."

The Lincoln researchers carefully adapted the Ainsworth Strange Situation Test (SST), which has been widely used to demonstrate that the bond between young children or [pet dogs](#) with their primary carer can be categorised as a 'secure attachment' – where the carer is seen as a focus of safety and security in potentially threatening (or unfamiliar) environments.

The study observed the relationships between a number of cats and their

owners, placing the pets in an unfamiliar environment together with their owner, with a stranger and also on their own. In varying scenarios, it assessed three different characteristics of attachment; the amount of contact sought by the cat, the level of passive behaviour, and signs of distress caused by the absence of the owner.

"Although our cats were more vocal when the owner rather than the stranger left them with the other individual, we didn't see any additional evidence to suggest that the bond between a cat and its owner is one of secure attachment. This vocalisation might simply be a sign of frustration or learned response, since no other signs of attachment were reliably seen. In strange situations, attached individuals seek to stay close to their carer, show signs of distress when they are separated and demonstrate pleasure when their attachment figure returns, but these trends weren't apparent during our research," said Professor Mills.

"For pet dogs, their owners often represent a specific safe haven; however it is clear that [domestic cats](#) are much more autonomous when it comes to coping with unusual situations. Our findings don't disagree with the notion that cats develop social preferences or close relationships, but they do show that these relationships do not appear to be typically based on a need for safety and security. As far as we could tell, the cats of owners who considered them to be highly attached did not differ from the others in this regard."

The results of the study reveal that while cats might prefer to interact with their owner, they do not rely on them for reassurance when in an unfamiliar environment, and the researchers believe this is because of the nature of the species as a largely independent and solitary hunter.

More information: "Domestic Cats (*Felis silvestris catus*) Do Not Show Signs of Secure Attachment to Their Owners." *PLoS ONE* 10(9): e0135109. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0135109](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0135109)

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