

New study offers insights into a dog's life in families with children

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Credit: University of Lincoln

Millions of families know how rewarding and enjoyable dog ownership can be – but now a new study has for the first time examined the quality of life for a pet dog owned by a family with children.

There is now extensive scientific research showing the many benefits that pet dogs bring to families, including improved family functioning and wellbeing for those with [children](#) with neuro-developmental disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and ADHD. For all children, dogs can provide valuable companionship, encourage exercise and family activities, and teach them about responsibilities.

Until now, little attention has been paid to how living with children

affects quality of life for pet dogs (those not trained as assistance dogs). Funded by Dogs Trust – the UK's largest dog welfare charity – a team of animal behaviour and welfare specialists from the University of Lincoln's School of Life Sciences are examining this question.

Published in the scientific journal *PLOS ONE*, their latest research involved interviewing parents who own a dog – half with typically developing children and half with children with autism or ADHD, with all children aged between four and 10 years old.

The research revealed that the child-dog relationship has a number of beneficial aspects for the dog, including a sense of routine, more time for fun and play, and companionship.

Dr Sophie Hall, a Research Fellow specialising in human-animal interactions at the University of Lincoln's School of Life Sciences, said: "Our study involved 36 dog-owning families, who all highlighted some key benefits that their pet dogs receive from living with young children.

"For example children provide close companionship for pets as well as imposing a sense of predictable and consistent routine in the home, in terms of feed and walk times, which we know is extremely important for a dog's wellbeing. Of course, children also play regularly with their pet dogs and activities such as throwing a ball and doing assault courses represent really valuable opportunities for exercise and positive mental stimulation.

"The study also highlighted some potentially negative impacts on the pet, which it is important for parents to be aware of when bringing a dog into a home with children."

The negative impact could be brought on by children having tantrums, with parents observing their dogs running away, shaking or hiding on

some of these occasions. Parents also observed a change in their dog's behaviour if it became 'over stimulated' – such as barking, becoming agitated, or seeking a place to escape – when their children were very noisy.

Other events that could cause potential distress for dogs in homes with children could include rough play or accidents such as collisions with toys or pulling the dog's tail.

The study suggests that in a home with small children, it is important for dogs to have a 'safe haven' to escape to if needed, and for parents to understand both the obvious and more subtle signs of distress in their pets and to teach their family about these signs. For example, pet dogs often have wide eyes or lick their lips when they are mildly stressed.

Dr Hall added: "The positive and negative aspects of the child-dog relationship were similar in families with typically developing children and in those with children with a neurodevelopmental disorder.

"As such, providing they are aware of key risk events and how to cope with these, and ensuring adequate supervision, parents should not necessarily be dissuaded from acquiring a pet dog because of their child's developmental issues. As we know, pet [dogs](#) can really enrich family life and support child development and wellbeing."

The results of this initial study are now being developed further by the team at the University of Lincoln with support from Dogs Trust, to develop an innovative new tool to help monitor the quality of life of [pet dogs](#) living in [family](#) homes. It is hoped that this tool could help to prevent potentially dangerous situations, which may lead to dog bites, and help owners to maximise the benefits of dog ownership.

Provided by University of Lincoln

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