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Why Do Kids Become Less Attached To Pets As They Get Older?

Children become less involved with their pets when they enter adolescence.

Posted Apr 16, 2019

One of the saddest songs in the American folk music canon is Peter, Paul, and Mary's 1963 smash hit, Puff, The Magic Dragon. In the unlikely case that you are not familiar with it, the song relates the story of Little Jackie Paper, a boy who becomes best buds with a magic dragon named Puff. Jackie and Puff spend their days playing pirate games and frolicking by the sea. But tragically, Jackie grows up and develops interests in "other toys." And with no warning, one gray night it happens, and Jackie abandons his giant reptilian companion animal. The song ends badly. Puff's green scales are falling out, his head is bent in sorrow, and, finally, "the mighty dragon sadly slips back into his cave."

The song raises an important question: Was Little Jackie Paper the exception or the rule in his declining attachment to [pets](#) as he grew up? [An article](#) recently published in the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* explains why the tragic tale of Jackie and Puff is an apt metaphor for the relationships between children and their pets. The research was part of a series of studies conducted at the [Children, Adolescents, and Animal Research Center](#) at the University of Edinburgh. The center is led by Professor Jo Williams and supported by Dr. Janine Muldoon, the lead author of the paper. The researchers were interested in:

1. Changes in children's' attachments to companion animals between the ages of 11 and 15
2. [Sex](#) differences in children's attachments to pets
3. Differences in children's attachment to different types of pets

Investigating the "Puff, the Magic Dragon Effect"

Many studies of human-animal interactions are compromised by small, unrepresentative samples. This was not a problem for the Scottish researchers. They used a large data set gathered as part of the Health Behavior In School Children study. The HBCS is an ongoing international investigation of children's health conducted every four years under the auspices of the World Health Organization. The researchers analyzed the responses of 2,472 Scottish children ages 11, 13, and 15 who lived with pets. There were equal numbers of boys and girls in each age group, and the HBCS survey was based on a nationally representative random sample.

Measuring Pet Attachment

The 2010 administration of the HBCS included the [Short Attachment of Pet Scale](#). Developed by the team, it includes nine questions assessing different dimensions of attachments to companion animals. These include liking animals generally, loving their personal pet, playing with their pet, considering their pet to be a [friend](#), finding comfort in their pet, talking to their pet, and being lonely without their pet. The items are scored on a 1 (low attachment) to 5 (high attachment) scale.

The Results

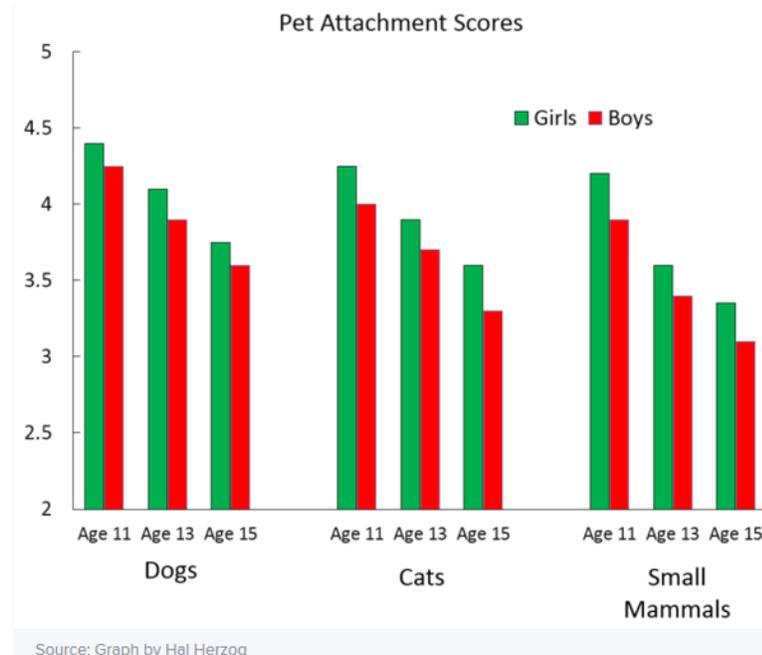
Pet attachment: The results supported the view that Little Jackie Papers' declining interest in his pet dragon is fairly typical. As you can see from the graph above, there were substantial drops in the average pet attachment scores among Scottish children between the ages of 11 and 15. Further, these ebbs in attachments to companion animals were found in both boys and girls. And drops in attachment occurred among dog owners, cat owners, and owners of small mammals. In short, the "Puff The Magic Dragon Effect" appears to be real and widespread.

The researchers found other interesting results.

- *Sex Differences.* Girls scored higher than boys on eight of the nine pet attachment dimensions (The only exception was whether they regarded their pet as a friend.) But, while these sex differences were "statistically significant," they were actually quite small. (Other studies have found similar results. See [Gender Differences in Human-Animal Interactions](#)).
- *Species Differences.* Dog-owning children were more attached to their pets than kids who owned cats or small mammals. Indeed, dog owners scored highest on all nine dimensions of pet attachment.
- *The size of the "Puff" Effect.* The pattern of declining attachment to pets occurred in both males and females and across different types of pets. But the effect was somewhat smaller among children who lived with dogs and larger among cat and small mammal owners.
- *Aspects of Attachment.* Declines with age occurred in all nine areas of pet attachment. The drops, however, were most evident in loving pets, feeling lonely without them, agreeing that pets made them happy, being comforted by pets, and viewing their pet as a friend.

Why Does Pet Attachment Decline During the Teen Years?

When our son Adam was 11 years old, he holed up in his room for two days with Tsali, our kind and gentle yellow Lab, after Mary Jean and I had grounded him for the weekend. (None of us can remember what Adam's transgression was.) Like Adam, many children turn to pets for solace and comfort. Indeed, in [a 2017 study](#), 12-year-olds reported they got considerably more emotional satisfaction from their pets than from their siblings.



Like Adam, many children turn to pets for solace and comfort. Indeed, in [a 2017 study](#), 12-year-olds reported they got considerably more emotional satisfaction from their pets than from their siblings.

But things can change as kids get older. In [an Australian study](#), 928 older teens kept logs of their daily activities. Shockingly, 75% of the roughly 820 kids with pets reported they had zero interactions with the family pet in the previous 24 hours. (In addition, the teens with pets did not get any more exercise than teens without pets. Nor did they have better physical or mental health than no-pet subjects.)

I asked my wife why she thought teens tended to become less attached to their pets as they got older. She said, "Well, it's obvious. That's the age when kids begin to start movin' on and movin' out." The University of Edinburgh researchers agree. They suggest that lower pet

attachment with age is due to “a shift in focus toward peer acceptance rather than familial connections that predominate earlier.” It seems that one of the consequences of regarding pets as family members is that as kids get older, family members—including canine and feline family members—play less important roles in their lives.

Indeed, this theme is even playing out in Professor William’s family. She told me in an e-mail, “My own 16-year-old daughter no longer takes our dog Lottie for walks or feeds her, but she does still cuddle up on the sofa with her when no one else is around and talks to her, so attachment is still there—it is just not as salient.”

Studies (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) produced by the [Children, Adolescent and Animal Research Center](#) are particularly important given the surprising lack of high-quality research on the roles of pets in the lives of kids. The team is presently investigating the individual differences in the relationships between children and companion animals.

Stay tuned.

Post Script: When I asked, Ryland, my 8-year-old grandson, why kids don't play as much with their pets when they get older, he replied, "Because they are more interested in their phones." I think he might be on to something.

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