Treasuring, Trashing or Terrorizing: Adult Outcomes of Childhood Socialization about Companion Animals

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Being hit or being given away are subabusive, common behaviors that harm companion animals. Violent childhood socialization increases the risk of adult abuse of animal companions, but relatively little is known about the origins of societally tolerated maltreatment of pets by adults. University students completed surveys about general attitudes toward animals, family socialization, and current relationships with pets. These students generally had positive childhood socialization about pets and reported high levels of current attachment. Adults whose parents had given their children's companion animals away had a heightened likelihood of giving their own pets away. Mothers' kindness to their children's pets was associated with adults' attachment to animal companions, but attachment was not related to the likelihood of hitting current pets. People who score high on a measure of pet abuse potential hit their pets. The pattern of findings related to gender implies that males are at somewhat greater risk for having negative socialization experiences involving pets, for greater pet abuse potential as adults, and for weaker attachments. However, females were equally likely to hit their pets or give them away. The childhood predictors of attitudes about animals, pet abuse potential, hitting pets, giving away pets, and attachment found in this nonclinical, noncriminal sample contribute to our understanding of developmental influences upon relationships with companion animals.

We do not know enough about how children grow up to treasure, discard, or terrorize their companion animals in adulthood. Most adults report highly affectionate relationships with pets. Yet, as part of the interlocking forms of violence in the family system, abuse of companion animals occurs. More commonly, occurrences include some mixture both of caring about animals and of harming them in socially tolerated ways, such as hitting. Given this apparent paradox, we need to understand not only violent abuse of pets within families but also subabusive maltreatment. What happens to companion animals in families who are...
not considered abusive? What happens to children because of these experiences? What attitudes and behaviors do children carry forward into adulthood? These questions deserve examination. We need to understand the consequences of the full range of childhood socialization experiences as they relate to companion animals.

**Treatment of Companion Animals**

Although a great deal of continuity between treatment of companion animals and treatment of human family members exists, the situations are not identical. Distinct aspects of an animal's status as a pet places that pet in special jeopardy. In a legal and psychological sense, we consider pets "owned possessions." We are allowed, even expected, to "master" and use them. The extent to which we connect with animals through moral concern, empathy, dominion, or utility varies by culture (Kellert, 1993) and gender (Fox, 1985; Kellert, 1985). Animals may contribute uniquely to our self-concept development (Myers, 1998), but our upbringing encourages dissociation from the harm we do to them (Plous, 1993).

We form relationships with nonhuman animals, not reflections of human-to-human interactions. Because these relationships are important in their own right, we must understand them on their own terms (Solot, 1997).

**Abuse of Companion Animals within Families**

What is abuse and what is acceptable harm? Recent grappling with this issue indicates that, culturally, we may do much harm to companion animals without the harm's being considered abusive or cruel (Rowan, 1993; Plous, 1993; Solot, 1997). Harming humans is generally considered to be worse than harming pets (Raupp, Barlow, & Oliver, 1997; Roscoe, Haney, & Peterson, 1986), and neglect occurs more often than violence (Vermeulen & Odendaal, 1993). Parents may or may not stress humane treatment of family pets. They may not even consider pets worthy of concern (Zahn-Waxler, Hollenbeck, & Radke-Yarrow, 1985). Ascione, Thompson, and Black (1997) assessed children's cruelty to animals. They intended to get a better picture of how widespread subabusive behaviors are and to differentiate normal behaviors from serious problems. As yet, no clear answer has emerged.

Mainstream coverage of person-to-person, family violence has rarely mentioned the issue of violence toward companion animals in families. Of interest, though, is the growing awareness that family violence occurs along a continuum rather than in a dichotomy. Recent discussions of abusive family relationships have urged us to
differentiate more carefully minimally harmful maltreatment or subabusive routine violence from serious abuse (Emery & Laumann-Billings, 1998; Graziano, 1994). Although this implies that we should also be interested in both severe attacks upon family pets and societally tolerated mistreatment, it still does not determine what constitutes serious versus routine mistreatment of companion animals.

In a line of research that is not yet well integrated into mainstream coverage of domestic violence, ample evidence exists that companion animals are frequently victims of serious and culturally unacceptable family violence. Research has shown that adults may abuse animals as part of wife-battery and sexual abuse (Adams, 1995; Ascione, Weber, & Wood, 1997), that child abuse and animal abuse often coincide (DeViney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983; Tebault, 1994), and that discipline of children’s misbehavior may extend from threats against pets to actually killing them (Ascione, 1993; Raupp et al., 1997). Companion animals may be hostages, tools of humiliation, or threatening examples of potential human pain and suffering that could be inflicted. Human victims may even be coerced into harming animals themselves.

In such an atmosphere, children seem to lose innocence quickly. Continuity of cruelty to animals from childhood to adulthood is strong, often leading to violence against humans (Ascione, 1993). Children who witness other forms of family violence may learn to harm animals. Ascione, Weber, and Wood (1997) found that children whose mothers had been battered were highly likely to abuse pets. The cause—stress or modeling—is not clear.

Serious abuse of companion animals within families, often part of the co-victimization of multiple members, can have an immediate and horrific psychological impact upon all the victims and witnesses, spread across the family as more members begin to take part, and have lifelong influences on the treatment of animals and people. Information about maltreatment of companion animals within families and its developmental outcomes for the children who witness it is woefully sparse. Growing up in a family that tolerates routine mistreatment of pets may resemble growing up with the experience of corporal punishment—a childhood socialization strategy that Straus, among others, has associated with a later increased incidence of family aggression (Straus & Yodanis, 1996). Straus and Yodanis claimed that social learning processes, depression, and lack of opportunity to learn better problem-solving techniques combine to create a link between mundane physical punishment and a heightened likelihood of later family aggression. Similar processes may link parental maltreatment of companion animals with negative outcomes for their children’s adulthood treatment of animal companions.
Giving Away Companion Animals—Serious but Normative

All too often, companion animals are, for a variety of reasons, sold, given away, or turned in to animal shelters. Hickrod and Schmitt (1982) claimed that, although seen as family members, pets enter families on probation. Pee on the sofa and you're out. The majority of those surrendering animals to shelters believed that cats and dogs misbehave out of spite (Salman et al., 1998). But DiGiacomo, Arluke, and Patronek (1998) described people as going through an extended struggle before surrendering a pet to an animal shelter. Respondents to their survey sometimes relinquished animals to protect human family members and often held extremely unrealistic beliefs about the likelihood that their pet would find a good, new home.

How can people claim to care about, yet discard, their pets? Commitment through thick and thin may be different from attachment (Staats, Miller, Carnot, Rada, & Tumes, 1996), hitting a snag when human needs take priority. The experience and outcome for the animals involved may be positive for some, but so many others are passed along into abuse, neglect, or death.

There is certainly a childhood socialization angle here. Kidd, Kidd, and George (1992) noted that pets adopted from shelters for the purpose of teaching a family’s children responsibility were more likely to be returned than pets adopted for the whole family. Threatening to give away a child’s pet because of child or pet misbehavior—joint discipline—is common, and actually giving away pets to punish children may occur (Raupp et al., 1997). What does this teach children about how to treat animals? What does it do to their future, adult attachment to pets when, during childhood, a loved one is discarded, albeit in a socially accepted way?

Human Attachment with Companion Animals

Applying the concept of attachment to humans and their animal companions goes beyond the idea of liking a pet. Attachment is a preference for a special other that tends to be reciprocated, and normally includes feelings of great warmth and security. An attachment relationship serves as an important organizer for daily behaviors and self-perceptions.

Attachment theory originally focused on how mother-infant relationships provide not only a social structure for meeting infants’ survival needs but also a working model that influences all later human relationships. Many of today’s theorists are likely to examine attachment as a lifespan phenomenon, with adults having multiple hierarchically organized attachments with other humans (Trinke
& Bartholomew, 1997). Attachment has several key components. Relationships are often viewed as safe havens and secure bases for venturing into the world. Attachment includes strong emotional ties to another. Other key aspects of attachment are a seeking of proximity and anxiety about separation (mourning the loss of a partner). Although attachments occur only in important relationships, not all important relationships contain an attachment bond (Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997). In a claim that deserves further theory-based testing, researchers in the area of human/pet relationships often describe these relationships as attachments. Human/companion animal relationships are certainly important experiences for many people and share most, if not all, of the key components of attachment. Affection for animal companions has been described and measured in many ways. Attachment is discussed as part of the relationship because humans often:

1. view their pets as family members (Cain, 1985; Hickrod et al., 1982);
2. acknowledge a pet’s contribution to family morale (Albert & Anderson, 1997);
3. find emotional closeness with, accept responsibility for, and share activities with pets (Poresky, Hendrix, Mosier, & Samuelson, 1987; 1988);
4. become emotionally involved with or committed to pets (Staats et al., 1996);
and
5. grieve when a pet dies (Planchon & Templer, 1996).

Women have shown more attachment for (Staats et al.) and grief about (Planchon & Templer) their companion animals than men. Extensive evidence exists that children often feel strong affection for pets and benefit from positive relationships with them (Davis & Juhasz, 1985; Kidd & Kidd, 1985). Gender differences in children’s bonds with pets, found in some studies but not in others, vary with what is measured (Melson & Fogel, 1996; Melson, Peet, & Sparks, 1991; Rost & Hartmann, 1994). Kidd and Kidd (1990) claimed that parents with strong attachments to pets tend to have children who are more involved with and interested in pets. Schenk, Templer, Peters, and Schmidt (1994) found that daughters were especially likely to reflect the pet attitudes of their parents. The importance of early family experiences in forming positive bonding and generalizing it to later relationships with companion animals has been highlighted (Poresky et al., 1988; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985; Soares, 1985). Overall, however, our knowledge of exactly how parents socialize children to encourage attachment to pets and the extent to which this carries forward into adulthood is scanty.
Purpose

The typical family is likely to hold a mixture of positive and negative socialization about companion animals, but this process has barely been mapped. This study investigates childhood predictors of adult attitudes and subabusive behaviors toward companion animals. The study also examines family socialization variables that predict adult giving away pets, potential for abusing pets, actually hitting them, and attachment with their animal companions.

Method

University students (N = 160), recruited from classes, scheduled individual appointments to complete a survey about their childhood socialization experiences with animals and their current attitudes and behaviors toward animals. Retrospective data about people’s childhoods may introduce inaccuracy. Data should be considered in this light—as adult recollection. Straus et al. (1996) considered such data to underestimate the frequency of negative events such as physical punishment. A total of 76% of the sample who had current relationships with companion animals answered more questions about their relationships with favorite animals, while the others answered only a few items about not having pets. Females (n = 111, 69%) volunteered for the study more frequently than males (n = 49, 31%). Because most respondents currently had pets, recruitment resulted in an uneven distribution of gender and those who had pets—17.5% of the sample were males with pets, 58.1% females with pets, 13.1% males without pets, and 11.3% females without pets. The percentages reported in the results section of this article are based on the number of valid responses for relevant items.

The survey included several key components and adapted portions of Milner’s widely used Child Abuse Potential Scale (1994) by rewording 19 items about children to refer to pets. For example, the phrase, “Children should stay clean” became “Pets should stay clean.” This created a pet abuse potential score. Milner’s scale includes several subscales such as physical abuse and ego strength, as well as items commonly associated with abusive behaviors. For some analyses, relevant items in the pet abuse potential measure were divided into these areas. Using the adaptation of Milner’s measure in this study included exploring its convergent validity with other variables in order to judge the usefulness of adding such a subscale to future administrations of Milner’s entire 160-item measure. The survey included an 11-item joint discipline scale that assessed the extent to which children and their pets were punished together; 3 items about moral, utility, and dominion
Table 1. Descriptions of Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHILDHOOD VARIABLES, all respondents</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>How father felt about and treated child’s pets (1-5 range, 5 = most positive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>How mother felt about and treated child’s pets (1-5 range, 5 = most positive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibs</td>
<td>How sibs felt about and treated child’s pets (1-5 range, 5 = most positive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Atmosphere</td>
<td>Mean of Father, Mother, Sibs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threaten</td>
<td>Did parents ever threaten to give away child’s pets? (Yes, No) (An item on the joint discipline scale)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Discipline</td>
<td>Mean of 11-item joint discipline scale, extent to which children and their pets were punished together or for each other’s behavior (possible range 1-2, lower value indicates more joint discipline)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knocked</td>
<td>Did parents knock around the child’s pets? (Yes, No) (An item on the adult pet abuse potential scale)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Gave Away</td>
<td>Did parents ever give away the child’s pets? (Yes, No)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Saved Animals</td>
<td>Did parents ever intervene to save animals from being harmed by the child? (Yes, No)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ADULT VARIABLES, all respondents</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has Pets</td>
<td>Does the respondent currently have any pets? (Yes, No) (Note: Many respondents currently without any pets reported that this was temporary and that they wanted to have a pet as soon as they could manage to do so.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Gave Away</td>
<td>Has the respondent ever given away or sold a pet or taken a pet to an animal shelter (after age 18)? (Yes, No)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pet Abuse Potential</td>
<td>Mean of 19-item pet abuse potential scale (possible range 1-2, lower value indicates more potential for abuse) (From Milner)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pet Physical Abuse Potential</td>
<td>Mean of 7-item subscale (From Milner’s subscale)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pet Abuse Potential, Face Validity</td>
<td>Mean of 10 items (From Milner’s group of items with high face validity)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pet Abuse Potential, Ego Strength</td>
<td>Mean of 2-item subscale (From Milner’s subscale)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moral Attitude</td>
<td>Characterizing oneself as concerned with right and wrong treatment of animals, opposing exploitation and cruelty (1-5 range, 5 = most strongly characteristic of oneself)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominion Attitude</td>
<td>Characterizing oneself as interested in controlling or mastering animals, usually in sporting situations (1-5 range, 5 = most strongly characteristic of oneself)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utility Attitude</td>
<td>Characterizing oneself as interested in practical uses and economic value of animals (1-5 range, 5 = most strongly characteristic of oneself)</td>
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Table 1. Descriptions of Variables (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADULT VARIABLES, respondents with current pets</td>
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<tr>
<td>(These items were answered about the respondent’s only pet or their favorite pet, or, if they had no favorite, the pet they had had the longest amount of time.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>Mean of 27-item attachment scale, human attachment felt for the current pet (range 1-5, 5=most attached)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit Pet</td>
<td>Has the respondent ever hit, swatted, or slapped the current pet? (Yes, No)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enjoyment</td>
<td>How much is the current pet enjoyed? (1-4 range, 1 = most enjoyment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burden</td>
<td>How much is the current pet thought of as a burden? (1-4 range, 1 = most burden)</td>
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</table>

attitudes toward animals (Kellert, 1985, 1993); and a 27-item attachment scale adapted and expanded from a variety of existing measures to capture not only affection but also selective preference, as well as the role of the relationship in organizing daily behaviors. Table 1 lists the variables.

Results

Many childhood and adult outcome variables were positive. Family atmosphere scores ($M = 4.27$, $SD = .72$) indicated generally loving treatment of childhood pets by family members. Mothers of girls were especially positive (mothers’ treatment of pets for girls $M = 4.47$, boys $M = 4.04$, $t = -.272$, $df = 148$, $p < .007$). Unless otherwise indicated, results reported are two-tailed. The tendency for joint discipline in childhood was low ($M = 1.96$, $SD = .10$). The overall potential for pet abuse by adults was low ($M = 1.79$, $SD = .12$). Adults reported high attachment with their current pets ($M = 3.73$, $SD = .70$). Their adult attitudes toward animals were favorable—high moral attitude ($M = 4.38$, $SD = .94$), low dominion attitude ($M = 1.38$, $SD = .90$), and low utility attitude ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 1.25$).

On the other hand, both childhood and adult variables contained some bad news for pets. Eleven percent ($n = 17$) of the respondents indicated that their parents had knocked their pets around during childhood. Childhood joint discipline items included threatening to give away ($n = 39$, 25%) or to abandon ($n = 10$, 6%), a child’s pet as a punishment; actually giving away a pet as punishment ($n = 6$, 4%); and separating a child and pet temporarily ($n = 7$, 5%). Two parents threatened to kill pets to punish children (one parent carried out the threat). For a variety of
reasons, parents gave away children's pets in 37% \( (n = 58) \) of these households. Adults reported an even higher frequency of giving away pets themselves \( (n = 73, 46\%) \). An alarming 43% \( (n = 51) \) of adults with pets have hit their pets.

In what could be a positive indicator or a red light, 10% \( (n = 15) \) of the respondents reported that their parents saved animals from harm by them during childhood. There were sex differences in moral attitude (males' \( M = 4.02 \), females' \( M = 4.54, t = -2.98, df = 73, p < .004 \)) and dominion attitude (males' \( M = 1.67 \), females' \( M = 1.25, t = 2.25, df = 60, p < .028 \)).

**Childhood Socialization and Negative Family Atmosphere**

When parents threatened to give childhood pets away to punish the child, the overall family atmosphere was reported to be more negative (family atmosphere in which parents threatened to give pets away \( M = 3.96 \), atmosphere when threats were not made \( M = 4.39, t = -3.31, df = 149, p < .001 \)). Fathers seemed especially implicated (fathers' treatment of pets in families that had threatened to give away pets \( M = 3.54 \), fathers of families not threatening to give away pets \( M = 4.23, t = -3.36, df = 142, p < .001 \)). Parents' knocking pets around was associated with both negative family atmosphere (family atmosphere when pets had been knocked around \( M = 3.75 \), when pets had not been knocked around \( M = 4.36, t = -3.46, df = 147, p < .001 \)) and the tendency for joint discipline (joint discipline when pets had been knocked around \( M = 1.91 \), when pets had not been knocked around \( M = 1.96, t = -1.86, df = 151, p < .033 \) one-tailed).

**Predictors and Correlates of Adults' Negative Relationships with Pets**

Although the sample mean for the pet abuse potential scale was low (1.79), several items on the scale received widespread endorsement. "Pets should stay clean" \( (n = 101, 66\%) \). "Pets sometimes get on my nerves" \( (n = 101, 64\%) \). "I sometimes worry that I cannot meet the needs of a pet" \( (n = 99, 62\%) \)."I have a pet who breaks things" \( (n = 55, 37\%) \). "Picking up a pet whenever the pet fusses spoils the pet" \( (n = 38, 25\%) \). "An owner must use punishment if an owner wants to control a pet's behavior" \( (n = 32, 21\%) \). "I have a pet who gets into trouble a lot" \( (n = 31, 20\%) \).

Few childhood variables predicted pet abuse potential. Adult pet abuse potential was related to parental threats to give childhood pets away (adult pet abuse risk when parents had threatened to give pets away \( M = 1.75 \), abuse risk when parents had not threatened to give pets away \( M = 1.81, t = -2.63, df = 155, p < .009 \)).
Lower scores indicated more risk of abuse. In particular, parental threats were related to the face validity ($p < .017$) and ego strength ($p < .001$) portions of the overall pet abuse potential scale.

In adulthood, pet abuse potential was related to several other variables. Males had greater pet abuse potential ($M = 1.75$) than females ($M = 1.81$) ($t = -2.61, df = 158, p < .01$). Sex differences were most evident for the face validity portion of the pet abuse potential scale ($p < .008$). Those who had hit their pets had higher pet abuse potential (abuse potential for those who had hit pets $M = 1.77$, for those who had not hit pets $M = 1.82$, $t = -2.68, df = 118, p < .008$). Hitting pets was not related to the physical abuse portion of the scale but was related to the face validity portion ($p < .003$) and the ego strength items ($p < .04$ one-tailed). Items from the face validity portion of the scale relating to hitting pets included the assertions: “A 3-month-old pet who wets in the house is bad” ($\chi^2 [1, N = 117] = 5.35, p < .02$) and “Pets sometimes get on my nerves” ($\chi^2 [1, N = 120] = 5.46, p < .02$), both. Sex and hitting pets did not interact to affect abuse potential.

Those who, as adults, gave away any pets had less potential for abuse ($M = 1.82$) than those who hadn’t given away any pets ($M = 1.76$) ($t = 3.15, df = 154, p < .002$). Giving away pets as an adult was related to lower potential for physical abuse ($p < .0001$) and to the face validity portion of the scale ($p < .04$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Correlations between Pet Abuse Potential Scores and Other Variables</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pet Abuse</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Atmosphere</td>
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<tr>
<td>Father</td>
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<td>Mother</td>
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<td>Burden</td>
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*-signif. LE .05 **-signif. LE .01 (2-tailed)
As Table 2 indicates, pet abuse potential was correlated with moral attitude, utility attitude, and dominion attitude. The more respondents characterized themselves as morally concerned about animals, the less potential for pet abuse. Conversely, characterizing oneself as a user or master of animals was correlated with pet abuse potential scores that indicated greater risk. Table 2 shows that greater pet abuse potential was associated with lower enjoyment and a higher sense of burden about the current companion animal. Other variables were correlated only with portions of the pet abuse potential scale, not the whole. These included correlation between the father’s treatment of childhood pets and the physical abuse portion of the scale and between family atmosphere, or the mother’s treatment, and the ego strength portion. Experiences of joint discipline in childhood were also correlated with the ego strength items.

Sex and hitting pets interacted in their relationship with family atmosphere (2 x 2 ANOVA, \(F = 4.289, df = 1, p < .041\)). Males who had hit pets as adults had a more negative family atmosphere as children (\(M = 3.87\)) compared with the other groups (family atmosphere for males who hadn’t hit pets \(M = 4.36\), for females who had hit pets \(M = 4.43\), for females who hadn’t hit pets \(M = 4.29\)). Sex and hitting pets also interacted in their relationship with perceiving pets as a burden (2 x 2 ANOVA, \(F = 5.279, df = 1, p < .023\)). Females who hadn’t hit pets saw their pets as least burdensome (\(M = 3.75\)), while males who hadn’t hit pets saw them as most burdensome (\(M = 3.29\)).

**Giving Away Companion Animals**

When parents gave away a child’s pets, the likelihood was that the child would do the same thing in adulthood (\(\chi^2[1, N = 155] = 5.52, p < .019\)). Of those children whose parents had not given away their pets, 39% gave away pets as adults. Of those children whose parents had given away their pets, an even higher number (59%) gave away their pets as adults. Parents’ giving away children’s pets was related to dominion attitude in adulthood (dominion attitude if parents had given away pets \(M = 1.19\), if parents had not \(M = 1.48, t = -2.34, df = 147, p < .021\)). Adults whose parents had given away childhood pets characterized themselves as less dominionistic.

**Predictors and Correlates of Adults’ Positive Relationships with Pets**

Adult attachment with current animal companions was high (\(n = 82, M = 3.73, SD = .70\)). Three items received the highest mean ratings on this scale: “I accept my pet
as he/she is” (4.70), “I talk to my pet” (4.52), and “If my pet died, I would be grief-stricken” (4.48). Two (though still at the positive end of the scale) received the lowest mean ratings: “I tell my pet things I can’t discuss with other people” (2.70) and “I worry about who would take care of my pet if something happened to me” (2.84).

There was a negative relationship between childhood joint discipline and adult attachment with the current animal companion (see Table 3). Due to scoring directions, this meant that more joint discipline was associated with higher attachment. Kind treatment of childhood pets by mothers was associated with higher adult attachment (see Table 3). Treatment of pets by fathers interacted with sex in affecting adult attachment (2 x 5 ANOVA, F = 2.792, df = 4, p < .030). Males whose fathers had been negative to pets showed less attachment as adults. Females whose fathers had been negative showed more attachment. There was also a main effect of sex on attachment, with females reporting more attachment with current pets (M = 3.84) than males (M = 3.40) (F = 8.704, df = 1, p < .004).

Table 3 shows that high attachment with a respondent’s current pet was associated with more moral concern about right and wrong treatment of animals, more enjoyment of their pet, and less perception of their pet as a burden. Attachment was not correlated with scores on the pet abuse potential scale or its subscales.

When parents had saved animals from harm by children, the adult children later reported less attachment with current pets (M = 3.46) than if parents had not done so (M = 3.79) (t = -1.67, df = 116, p < .049 one-tailed).

| Table 3. Correlations between Attachment with Current Pet and Other Variables |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------|
| **Attachment**                               |                  |
| Family atmosphere                            | .1666            |
| Father                                        | .0864            |
| Mother                                        | .2706**          |
| Sibs                                          | .0038            |
| Joint Discipline                              | -.1900*          |
| Pet Abuse Potential                           | .1597            |
| Moral                                         | .3639**          |
| Utility                                       | .1395            |
| Dominion                                      | -.0791           |
| Enjoyment                                     | -.5012**         |
| Burden                                        | .2711**          |

*-signif. LE .05  **-signif. LE .01 (2-tailed)
Discussion

Childhood socialization experiences and adult relationships with animal companions are generally very positive. Yet, this study offers support for the claim of heightened risks for companion animals if childhood socialization experiences are negative—even within a nonclinical, noncriminal sample. While some of the significant findings reflect small behavioral differences, they are generally in expected directions, form a basis of comparison for future studies using clinical or criminal samples, and show that common, subabusive behaviors can be important socializers. Fathers and mothers tend to behave somewhat differently in this area of socialization, and sons and daughters develop somewhat differing attitudes and behaviors. It appears that relationships of males with animal companions are especially vulnerable to damage during childhood.

Although positive relationships with pets are reported, it is clear that some harmful behaviors such as hitting pets or giving them away are so common among both males and females as to be normative. It is also clear that mistreating pets (or the potential for it) and strong emotional attachment with pets can co-exist.

Although most of the findings are relatively easy to understand, the act of giving away pets was associated with both positive and negative outcomes. When relinquishment is used as a variable in future studies, circumstances and motives for giving pets away should be included.

Abuse Potential

These university students showed a low potential for abusing their current animal companions in socially unacceptable ways. However, they showed some endorsement of unrealistic, rigid expectations. This may reflect a lack of knowledge about animals in general or a lack of acceptance of the individual quirks of every companion animal. Lack of knowledge and understanding can affect the quality of the relationship and even lead to abuse.

Scores indicating greater potential for abusing companion animals are associated with a childhood factor (threatening to give pets away), with gender, with perceptions of the relationship with one’s current pet, and with overall attitudes about animals. Threatening to give children’s pets away as punishment may harm their future relationships with animals. These children grow up carrying forward their fear and anger (perhaps even anger toward pets). They translate the punitive-ness that had been directed at them into a set of rigid demands for good behavior on the part of their future pets. This could be particularly true if the childhood
punishment had happened because of a pet’s misbehavior, such as being threatened with loss of a pet because the pet made a mess. Threatening to give pets away emerged in this study as an important developmental event.

The relationship between abuse risk and actually hitting pets supports the validity of the pet abuse potential measure. But the items in the pet abuse potential measure more than a wish to harm animals; they highlight a person’s inflexibility and need for control. Males’ higher scores on the pet abuse potential measure are compatible with the instrumental, “do it my way” aspects of the male gender role. While males have a higher abuse risk, females are equally likely to hit pets. Hitting pets is a very common behavior, although the 43% reporting doing so in this sample are not as high as the 90% of adults reporting their use of corporal punishment to discipline young children (Straus and Yodanis, 1996). A comparison of reasons for using subabusive physical force against children and pets would be interesting.

The way in which gender and hitting pets interact with the perception that pets are a burden is difficult to explain. For women, not hitting pets is accompanied by a perception that their pets are not a burden. This makes sense. But hitting pets or seeing them as a burden may have a different meaning for males, given the finding that males who don’t hit their pets see them as more burdensome. Perhaps males who don’t hit their pets, compared to males who do, are more aware of the need to care for pets but don’t see this as something they want to do.

As abuse potential goes up, some aspects of the quality of the relationship with a pet deteriorate, enjoyment lessens, and a sense of burden increases. Future studies will try to establish cause and effect directions in these relationships. It is not surprising that higher pet abuse risk is related to less moral concern for animals, more endorsement of using animals, and more wish for mastery over them. Again, however, the cause-effect aspect of these relationships is not established.

Parents who dislike pets are more likely to knock them around and threaten to give them away. Fathers are the most likely family members to be negative and there is a trend for sons (compared to daughters) to be raised in a negative atmosphere about pets. Males from these negative families are more likely to hit their pets as adults. All of this is consistent, but the contrasting finding that fathers’ kindness toward their children’s pets is correlated with the adult children’s greater physical abuse potential is baffling. Family atmosphere deserves continuing scrutiny.

The relationship between pet abuse potential and giving away previous pets during adulthood, with lower risk associated with having given animals away, seems problematic. If animal companions who cause trouble are given away, this...
outlet may lower frustration or confrontation with a particular animal. Merely seeing pets as disposable and perhaps interchangeable could mean less likelihood of being rigid in one’s demands. Yet pets when they have been given away, tend to face a bleak world.

**Giving Away Pets**

Parental modeling exacerbates the risk that pets will be given away. There is intergenerational transmission of the habit of discarding pets. Beyond that, new factors may have emerged in today’s busy families. Investigating everyday competing loyalties and betrayals in human friendships and loving relationships, Baxter et al. (1997) found time conflicts to be, by far, the most frequent dilemma faced. In today’s hurried world, there may be more pressure to jettison demanding pets than ever before.

The finding that adults from families who had given away childhood pets see themselves as less domineering may be related to a decreased sense of responsibility for animals’ welfare. Perhaps the act of giving away companion animals (especially if they have had behavioral problems) shifts the focus from having control struggles with pets to seeing them as replaceable commodities or relieves guilt over the failure to interact effectively with them. This would fit with the finding of lesser abuse potential in adults who have given away pets.

**Attachment**

The adults surveyed reported high levels of attachment behaviors and feelings toward current animal companions. Most predictors of attachment in this study were straightforward. Women reported more attachment than men did, as has been found in some previous studies. Attachment is especially strong if mothers had been loving and kind to childhood pets. Both these findings fit the nurturing, expressive role associated with women.

High attachment is associated with moral concern for animals, with enjoying current pets, and with low likelihood of seeing pets as a burden. These relationships should be examined further for causal directions.

Less clear is what occurs when parents intervene to stop children from harming animals. This is associated with less moral concern about animals and less attachment with pets among adults. The original hunch had been that intervention is a form of encouragement of empathy. These results hint instead that parental intervention may be a response to early and problematic lack of empathy on the part...
of a child. These situations should be examined more closely to find out why they occur and whether parents tend to increase efforts to model kindness afterward.

Several of the findings about attachment are complex. Joint discipline had been expected to damage attachment. Instead, adult attachment was heightened when childhood joint discipline had occurred. The most frequent type of joint discipline for these respondents—threats to give a child’s pet away for child misbehavior—was rarely carried out. Perhaps threats to give away a child’s pet created concern, caring, or protectiveness, and these feelings were rekindled in adults’ relationships with pets. Threats to give pets away can certainly not be recommended; they are also related to abuse risk. It is as if joint discipline created an exaggeration of emotions in both positive and negative directions. More information about these experiences is needed.

Although females reported overall stronger attachments with their animal companions, and mothers’ kindness to pets supports later attachments for males and females, two more complex interactions show that males and females may construct different meanings for the same events. Sons and daughters show contrasting reactions to fathers’ dislike of childhood pets, with boys growing up to be less attached and girls growing up to be more attached. Sons may be especially receptive to fathers’ negative messages, but why girls would be resistant to them is unclear.

Future studies should examine the constellation of parent-child attachments, child-pet attachments, and adult-pet attachments to explore the possibility that attachments with pets do use the parent-child relationship as a working model. While this study operationalized attachment in terms of intensity of feelings and frequencies of behaviors, the approach used by Trinke & Bartholomew (1997) to examine the number and organization of adults’ attachment relationships could be applied to determine how often animal companions have an indisputable place in that hierarchy.

**Recommendations**

This study takes a look at the outcomes of childhood socialization as it relates to companion animals, but much more research is warranted. Along with research in the area of normal family socialization, studies of families involved in domestic violence are needed. We must understand domestic violence in all its forms to find ways to save animals from terror and discarding and to spare human victims the pain of being abused along with their pets.
Educational efforts must also move forward. Information about how companion animals are treated in families, how children are socialized about pets, and how pets are involved in domestic violence should be included in professional reviews and university courses. The word must go out to social welfare professionals that pets are part of the families their agencies are supporting. And the word must go out to parents: What you do to Fido and Fluffy has lifelong effects—not just on your pets, but on your children and, when they grow up, on their Fidos and Fluffies. Parents should treasure animal companions and transmit this emerging norm to their children.

Notes

1. Correspondence should be addressed to Carol Raupp, Psychology Department, California State University, Bakersfield, CA 93311, or by e-mail to craupp@csubak.edu. The author wishes to thank Sandra Severy for her help in coding the data and the article’s reviewers for their helpful comments.

2. The terms “pet” and “companion animal” are used interchangeably in this article. “Pet” may emphasize the animal’s status as a possession, so use of “companion animal” has been encouraged by this journal. However, the term “pet” was used in the survey for this study because of its familiarity for respondents.

References


