**Arab Children's Attitudes Toward Pets in Israel**

**Abstract**

Many children develop empathy and positive attitudes such affection toward animals, particularly domesticated pets. Some of them express these feelings by adopting a pet. Some questions are raised: How is this positive context created? Does it depend on culture, parents' education, socioeconomic status? Does it depend on gender or age? Our main research question was: to what extent does the child's personal experience contribute to developing a positive stance toward raising pets at home?

The main research hypothesis predicted that personal experience—i.e., real-life experience of raising pets at home or emotional identification with children's stories about animals—contributes to the development of positive attitudes toward pets. The background variables—parents' education, socioeconomic status, gender and age—have only minor effects.

The study participants were 267 children (male and female), 7–9 years of age. They were randomly sampled from 25 Arab elementary schools in the northern and Triangle zone of Israel. This study is the first one was done in this population. Children were asked by their teachers to answer 38 questions pertaining to various statements relating to the research topic.

The results of this study confirmed the research hypothesis: there was a statistical correlation between having pets in the home or reading stories about animals, and developing positive attitudes toward pets. Further, personal experience with pets, whether real or through reading stories, contributes to the development of positive attitudes toward raising pets.

**Keywords**: Arab children attitudes, domesticated pets, children personal experience, reading stories, parent’s education.

Children are attached to animals, especially domesticated pets. Animals are considered an integral part of the child's world. Children raise pets at home, watch animals in their surroundings, on the computer or on television, visit them at the zoo, and pet them at first acquaintance at pre- and post-kindergarten ages. They also read stories featuring animals as characters, study about them in school, and sometimes participate in educational activities on, for example, wildlife reserves.

There is a large body of research on the fascinating integration between children and pets, exploring various aspects, such as: Which pets are most often raised? What factors affect this decision? What therapeutic benefits do pets provide for children?

Accumulating research shows different levels of interaction between children and animals in general, from emotional, psychological and social standpoints (Daly & Morton, 2009), (Kubiatko, 2012). . These studies contribute to a better and more detailed understanding of children's personal development, and provide us with more cultural and clinical tools to nurture it.

**The Aims of the study**

Our study focused on Arab children's attitudes toward pets, i.e., how they comprehend pets, as opposed to how adults view them. The research aimed to elucidate potential factors that concretely create a positive attitude toward pets, including socioeconomic status, gender and reading books about animals. We further determined the most common animals kept in the home or, in the case of no pets, those the children would choose to have in the future, based on the child's gender.

**Theoretical and research background**

Different aspects of the interaction between animals and humans have been studied, like the contribution of pets in children and adolescents psychosocial development, Motives for choosing pets (Beth, Houtte& Jarves, 1995) Children and adults tend to have different motivations for raising pets in the home.(Archer, 1997).

From a therapeutic point of view, the contribution of the interaction between animals and humans is immense for both parties. Taking care of a pet is good for human health in the short and long term (Wells, 2009). People who have pets gain more enjoyment than people who do not, and they benefit at both social and emotional levels. For example, owning a pet can contribute to high self-esteem, positive self-awareness, and less depression and loneliness (McConnell & Brown, 2011). But Hal herzog takes things in limited liability when talking about a long term of influence, That have shown recent studies on the beneficial impacts of dog therapy in college students who suffer homesickness and stress, were temporary, as was examined in (Binfet & Passmore, 2016).

In a study examining the benefits of having pets at work, clerks who had pets at work had reduced tension levels and more social interactions than to those who did not have pets (Wells & Perrine, 2001).

There is a further effect for children who grow up with pets on adulthood. In a study of Canadian students aged 18–21 years, those who had pets at home when they were children had lower levels of stress in their academic lives, and greater social skills, than students who had not raised pets as children (Daly & Morton, 2009).

This effect is also reflected in other fields, such how pets at home can contribute to make transfer in another circumstances. Prokop, Özel&Usak (2009) studied the effect of number of pets in the home on fear of snakes among students from Slovenia and Turkey. It turned out that there was an association between increasing number of pets in the home and a decreasing level of fear of snakes.

In the western world, pets are part of the family. In a study on why people love dogs, 48% of the participants considered their dogs to be family members, 67% said that they already had a picture of the dog on them at the time of the survey, 73% allowed the dog to sleep in their bedroom, and 40% celebrated their dog's birthday (Archer, 1997).

In a survey of 400 pet owners, the major reasons given for acquiring a pet were friendship, and a feeling of security (Lago, Kafer, Delaney, &Connel, 1988). In a study of 737 dog owners, most acquired dogs for the purpose of friendship (Jagoe&Serpell, 1996).

According to Veldkamp (2009), in Japan, many pet owners treat pets, especially dogs and cats, as family members. This is related to the times, as families become sparser and have small number of children. They even go so far as to bury their pets in pet cemeteries, and grieve the death of their pets (Stallones, 1994).

In a study of 975 participants from the USA, most of them women (789) that were randomly selected, on the link between dogs as pets and the types of relationships that adults have with them, 36% claimed that their dogs provided them with a safe haven, 39% considered them a secure base, 61% for proximity maintenance (staying close to pets, which keep them safe), and 43% considered them for separation distress. Most of the participants preferred to turn to dogs when they were distraught, instead of turning to mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters or best friends (Kurdek, 2009).

Studies suggest that Taking a pet into one's home promotes health. In a study of 285 children aged 11–19 years in Slovenia, exploring the association between having pets and allergies from infectious diseases, most of the children (58%) had cats or dogs, and their close contact with the animals induced a protective response against infections compared to children who were not in close contact with their pets (Prokop&Fančovičová, 2011). According to Morley and Fook (2005), the benefit of having pets at home acted primarily at the emotional and psychological health levels, and promoted social interactions and responsibility.

Research on combinations of animals (cats, rabbits, hamsters, rats, turtles, frogs, birds, fish…) )in particular environments showed that wide use of animals in primary schools and kindergartens in California, in teaching science and other fields, raises the students' motivation to study (Zasloff&Hart, 2000). It has been suggested that human education contents should be added to the formal curriculums that will foster positive attitudes toward animals and an awareness of animal suffering from educational, environmental and human viewpoints. Such an addition is expected to lead these children, who will grow up to be teachers and policy-makers, to design a better and more beautiful world (Pattnaik, 2004).

According to Raupp (1999), many parents are aware of the importance and strength of the interaction between pets and their children. This bond can be exploited by few of them (7.5%) in negative ways, for example, to punish their children, and consequently the animals are seen as usful in educating their children. It is worth noting that animal torture and exploitation for inhumane purposes are important issues, which very few studies have dealt with (Raupp, 1999; Stekette et al., 2011). A study of people with high socioeconomic status revealed the dark side of dog ownership, where specific rare dog species are acquired for prestige, and for specific characteristics such as their size or general appearance (Beverland, Farrelly, & Ching Lim, 2007).

On the other side of the equation is the animal, which also enjoys interaction with humans. Good human treatment leads to good behavior in the animal. It reduces the dog's offensive behavior and its wariness of strangers. A study of 737 dog owners revealed that dogs are affected by their owners' behavior toward them. The dogs' aggression levels declined as the owners treated them more warmly, by allowing them, for example, to sleep in their bedroom, or giving them their meal at around the same time as their owners' meal (Jagoe& Serpell, 1996). Another study showed that as the level of connection between the owners of 37 dogs and 47 cats and their family increased, the animals improved their behavior and became more content, intelligent and friendly. The animals lost some of their defensiveness and were less aggressive (Serpell, 1996).

**The study questions:**

1. To what extent does children's personal experience with animals at home affect their stance toward pets?
2. Does reading stories about animals affect the stances of children aged 7–9 years toward pets?
3. Is there differences between gender in their choices of pets -dependent among 7- to 9-year-olds?
4. Which kind of pets do children prefer?

**The study hypotheses:**

H1a: The more personal experience the 7- to 9-year-old child has with pets, the more positive his/her stance will be toward pets, relative to children with less or no such experience.

H2a: SES (socioeconomic status), parents' education and gender will not affect the child's stance.

H2b: Reading books about animals can be considered a different aspect of experience with animals: the more stories the children read about animals, the more positive their stance toward animals will be relative to children who read less or not at all.

H3:

There are a differences between gender in their choices of the adopted pet currently or in the future.

**Methodology**

**Participations**

**267 children from first and second grade, participated in this study (**138 first-graders, and 129 second-graders**), randomly selected, from 25 Arab elementary schools in the northern and triangle zones of Israel. Of them 132 were boys and the rest were girls. Their age range from 7-9 years.**

All of children had brothers and sisters. More than half of them (51.7%) had three to four siblings at home. The parents' education was mostly secondary school (50%) and higher (33.5%).

The SES (economic status) of the children's' families was in moderate to very high level (46.7%- 40.8%). 97.4% of the fathers worked, and 53.2% of children's' mothers had part-time jobs.

**Measures and procedure**

The surveyed group filled out the questionnaires with the assistance of their teachers, who explained the aims of the study to the children, read the questions for them and explained the range of answers.

***Children attitudes:***

The children's attitudes towards pets was built, specifically for this research. as we found no measurement capturing this issue in the literature (see Appendix).

The research tool passed the reliability and validation pre-test conducted by three experts. Following this pre-test, some of the items were changed in accordance with the experts’ notes until the questionnaire reached its final version.

Then, it was delivered to a group of 30 children from two Arab schools

in the northern district to modify the questionnaire for the research population. This stage brought about a significant improvement in question formulation.

This version had 26 items. Children rated their attitudes toward pet with respect to each item on a 3-point Likert scale (1=disagree to 3 =agree to a high degree).

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for internal traceability to measure the reliability of the questionnaire was high, α = 0.79, indicating high grade stability. Reversed items 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 12 and 17.(thus all of the items in the questionnaire represent attitudes toward pets)

The questionnaire contains questions depict the positive attitudes of pet (see Appendix), such as: " A pet is useful for the house’s residents".

Further, the questionnaire contained also questions about

background variables: grade in school, gender, parents' education, parents' employment, income, number of siblings, the type of pet lives in the home or, if the home has no pets, which type might be adopted in the future.

***Data analysis***

The data was analyzed using SPSS programmer. In order to examine difference between two independent samples (i.e., gender, with or no pet), we used T-test. Further, we used F-test (analysis of Variance -ANOVA) in order to examine differences between more than two groups(such as fathers educations) …Finally, we Pearson test to examine the correlation between children's attitudes toward pets and reading stories about animals.

**Results**

Table no. 1 depicts the results of the children attitudes of pet, regarding their experience.

the results shows that there is a difference in attitudes between children with and without pet at home t=3.18; p<.001…..thus hypothesis no. 1a was confirmed.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | No pet at home  (N=129) | | There is a pet at home (N=134) | | Sig |
|  | mean | S.D. | mean | S.D. |  |
| Children's attitudes toward pets | 2.33 | .38 | 2.46 | .26 | .00 |

Table1. Comparison of attitudes toward pets held by children with and without a pet at home

In Table 1, the difference between the averages of the two groups (pet at home vs. no pet at home) was statistically significant . Thus, there was a significant relation between children's attitude toward pets and having pets at home (*p*< 0.001). Attitudes towards pets related in having pets at home or not having. Thus children who have pet, emphasize more (positive) attitude towards pet (mean= 2.46) than those who did not. These attitudes related to: Pet develops compassion and kindness in children, pet develop responsibility in children or items such as: A pet brings joy and delight to the house

Regarding the differences in attitudes according to grade.

Table 2: Children’s attitudes towards pets according to grade in school

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Second Grade  (N=129) | | First Grade (N=134) | | Sig |
|  | mean | S.D. | mean | S.D. |  |
| Children's attitudes toward pets | 2.4 | .34 | 2.39 | .32 | .77 |

T- Test showed that The differences were not significant. Thus, there was no statistically significant difference between grades in children's attitudes toward pets (*p*> 0.05) (See Table 2). Children attitudes toward pets didn’t relate to grade. The attitudes average is 2.39 in first grade and in average 2.4 in second grades. It means that those children attitudes related to: Pet develops compassion and kindness in children, pet develop responsibility in children (please see items in appendix, the negative items was revised). Or positive attitudes such as: A pet is a friend of his owner

Table 3: Children’s attitudes towards pets according to gender

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Girls  (N=135) | | Boys  (N=132) | | sig |
|  | mean | S.D. | mean | S.D. |  |
| Children's attitudes toward pets | 2.42 | .34 | 2.37 | .32 | .24 |

Table 3 describes the children's attitudes toward pets according to gender.

The attitudes as we said before related to children perception of pets, such as: Raising pets is a very great delight.

The differences in the boys' and girls' averages were not significant. Thus, there was no statistically significant difference between boys' and girls' attitudes toward pets (*p*> 0.05).

In order to examine the differences in children fathers education, we conducted ANOVA test. The results showed that (Table 4)

Table 4: Children’s attitudes towards pets according to father’s education

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Middle school  (N=41) | | High school (N=136) | | academic(N=78) | | other(N=10) | | F | sig |
|  | mean | S.D. | mean | S.D. | mean | S.D. | mean | S.D. |  |  |
| Children's attitudes toward pets | 2.39 | .31 | 2.41 | .33 | 2.40 | .35 | 2.29 | .25 | .37 | .77 |

Table 4 describes children's attitudes toward pets (Such as:… )According to their fathers' education. Differences between averages in fathers' education were not significant. Thus, there was no statistically significant difference in children's attitudes toward pets according to father's education (*p*> 0.05). as we can see from the table, that the mean attitudes of children, related to their fathers education is so similar, thus children whose father with middle education, their mean education is 2.39, high education is 2.41 and the academic fathers is 2.40, these means are so similar, thus there are no differences between them. Thus father education didn’t affect children attitudes towards pet.

Table 5: Children’s attitudes towards pets according to mother’s education

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Middle school  (N=29) | | High school (N=128) | | Academic(N=100) | | Other(N=9) | | F | sig |
|  | Mean | S.D. | mean | S.D. | mean | S.D. | mean | S.D. |  |  |
| Children's attitudes toward pets | 2.34 | .41 | 2.39 | .34 | 2.43 | .28 | 2.30 | .27 | .87 | .45 |

Table 5 describes children's attitudes toward pets according to their mothers' education. Differences between the averages for mother's education were not significant. Thus, there was no statistically significant difference in children's attitudes toward pets according to mother's education (*p*> 0.05). it means that positive attitudes (i.e. Keeping pets enhances children’s feelings of sympathy or items which was reversed such as: Raising pets is financially expensive ) were not related to mothers education.

as we can see from the table, that the mean attitudes of children, related to their mothers education is so similar, thus children whose mothers with middle education, their mean education is 2.34, high education is 2.39 and the academic fathers is 2.43, these means are so similar, thus there are no differences between them. Thus mother’s education didn’t affect children attitudes towards pet.

Table 6: Children’s attitudes towards pets according to economic status

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Low  (N=33) | | Medium (N=125) | | High  (N=109) | | F | sig |
|  | mean | S.D. | mean | S.D. | mean | S.D. |  |  |
| Children's attitudes toward pets | 2.29 | .40 | 2.40 | .32 | 2.42 | .31 | 2.42 | .09 |

Table 6 describes children's attitudes toward pets according to economic status. There was no statistically significant difference between children's attitudes toward pets based on economic status (*p*> 0.05). as we can see from the table, that the mean attitudes of children, related to their status economic is so similar, thus children with low socioeconomic, their mean is 2.29, medium is 2.40 and the high socioeconomic is 2.43, these means are so similar, thus there are no differences between them. Thus socio- economic status didn’t affect children attitudes towards pet.

In order to examine hypothesis no. 2, Pearson test was conducted. We found a strong and significant relation between children's attitudes toward pets and reading stories (*r* = 0.628, *P*< 0.001): the more the children read stories about animals, the more positive their stance toward pets..

Finally, the third hypothesis was also not confirmed, i.e., attitudes regarding pet is not gender dependent. The mean between girls and boys in attitudes is similar (2.42 mean attitudes for boys and 2.37 for girls=1.16; p=n.s.

Finally, Dogs and cats were the most common pets in the home among boys; however, the picture of future adoptions shifted, to dogs and birds. Fish were among the least common pets, both in the home and as a future choice. The most common pets for girls were cats and birds, and the least common were dogs and fish, both concurrently and as a future choice.

**Discussion**

Our hypothesis that the more personal experience a child has had with pets, the more positive his/her stance toward them will be, was validated. External factors such as socioeconomic status, parents' education and gender, did not have a greater effect on children's attitudes than personal experience. A statistically significant correlation was found between children's attitudes toward pets and having pets at home. Children who had a pet at home showed a more positive attitude toward animals than those with no pet in the home (Table 1). The importance of this is that children's personal experience with pets contributed to their positive attitude toward pets, as was further manifested by low levels of positive attitude among children who do not have pets.

Prokop and Tunnicliffe (2008) conducted a study in Slovenia on three groups of children aged 5–15 years to explore the effects of adopting pets on children's attitudes toward popular and unpopular animals. The children who had pets at home expressed more positive attitudes and showed more knowledge about animals in general than those who did not have pets. The more the children handled pets (on a scale of 1–3), the more their positivity increased. In a study by Prokop et al. (2009) on the effects of number of animals in the home on fear of snakes among students from Slovenia and Turkey, an association also emerged: the personal experience gained when caring for pets contributed to the participants' positive attitude toward snakes during adolescence, and decreased their fear of them. A group of 18- to 21-year-old students from Canada who, when they were children, had had a dog, a cat or both, showed less stress and better social skills than students who did not have childhood pets (Daly & Morton, 2009). This finding further reinforces the importance of personal experience in creating benefits for children.

According to Table 3, there was no statistically significant difference between genders in the children's attitudes toward pets. Prokop and Tunnicliffe (2008) found no association between gender and attitudes toward or knowledge of pets among their participants. Although the number of pets owned by the participants was not checked, their finding strengthened our suggestion of no association between gender and attitudes toward or knowledge of pets. Our answer of the question regarding differences between type of pet and gender was not validated. Choice of concurrent or future pets was not found to be gender-dependent. Boys' and girls' pet choices tended not to differ.

However, according to Prokop and Tunnicliffe (2008), girls aged 10–15 years in Slovenia had more pets than boys. Regarding the effects of adopting pets on children's attitudes toward popular and unpopular animals, we found that girls took a more positive stance toward popular animals, such as rabbits and squirrels, and a less positive stance toward non-popular animals as compared to boys. Boys expressed more positive stances toward wolves than girls. A less positive attitude toward dangerous or disease-causing animals seems to be characteristic of girls.

In the study by Prokop and Tunnicliffe (2008), the most common pets in the category most relevant to our study (5- to 10-year-olds) were dogs, cats, birds, and poultry. In the study by Wells and Perrine (2001), 74% of the participants owned dogs, and only 34% owned cats. In a study exploring visual acquaintance with animals and fear in 27 kindergarten-aged children (5–6 years old) in the Czech Republic, three animal choices that were found at high rates were dolphins, dogs and cats. The children stated that they loved dogs and cats because both of them are beautiful and cats have velvety fur. No differences were found between ages or genders (Kubiatko, 2012).

We can see that these studies are so relevant to our finding, to show a universal type of choices between children.

These results are not in line with study of Stekette et al., (2011) on the acquisition of pets by adults, which found that adult women seemed to prefer cats to dogs..

As already noted, Prokop and Tunnicliffe (2008) found that girls had a less positive stance toward unpopular animals such as wolves, relative to boys. The girls' sensitivity to animals was also measured in terms of sadness when the animal dies, as we can see in Brown and Richards (1996) when a pet dies, girls are more apt to express sadness than boys. Israelis are considered to be among the nations that tend to cry when a pet dies (Williams & Morris, 1996).

According to the findings in Tables 4–6, there was no significant association between positive attitudes toward pets and parents' education, or socioeconomic status at home. The parents' education was mostly high-school level and above, creating similar averages (2.43–2.39), and the association was therefore not significant.

According to Prokop and Tunnicliffe (2008), the probability of having pets in the home is high in children whose parents are educated. In our research, we did not measure the association between having pets and parents' education, but we did measure the connection between positive attitudes toward pets and parents' education. The finding of economic status not being significantly associated with children's attitudes toward pets might be due to the fact that this factor is regarded as an external effect, and only personal experience was found to affect the children's attitudes. Children in the Arab sector do not spend large amounts of money on pet paraphernalia, and most of the food that they give to the animals is homemade, mostly leftovers from the family meals, and thus a high economic status is not a prerequisite to owning a pet.

Our second hypothesis was also confirmed: reading stories about animals is considered a different aspect of personal experience—the more the children read stories about animals, the more positive their attitude toward pets compared to those who read less or did not read at all. In general, these stories present animals as likeable characters with positive roles, and the readers, especially children, feel empathy toward them. Studies indicate that people who show empathy toward others and are open, pleasant and self-aware, also show positive attitudes toward pets compared to individuals who do not have these characteristics (Erlanger &Tsytsarev, 2012).

The transition from the imaginary world in stories or films to the real world is problematic. Children regard the pets in stories and films differently from real pets. In the stories they are heroes, they talk, they have superpowers and they love. This affects the child's comprehension of the reality of animals, and can cause problems and suffering for pets, because they do not meet the child's expectations from fantasy or the media (Anderson & Henderson, 2005). In this study, we did not consider films or other elements of the imagination as variables. The questions regarding reading were general and did not touch on the details associated with the child's imaginary world.

**Conclusion and summary**

This study dealt with three hypothesis: a significant association between children's positive attitudes toward pets and their personal experience with them, a significant connection between reading stories about animals and a positive attitude toward pets, and a dependence of the type of pet owned or selected for future ownership on the child's gender. Our survey of 267 Arab children from the northern and Triangle areas of Israel confirmed these hypothesis, since a statistically significant connection was found between raising pets at home and a positive attitude toward them. Thus, children who had pets at home showed a more positive stance toward animals than those who had less, or no pets in the home. This indicates the contribution of personal experience in raising pets to creating a positive stance toward animals in general and pets in particular. In addition, reading stories about animals was found to create a type of personal and emotional experience in the child's mind. Children who read more stories showed more positive attitudes toward pets than those who read less, or not at all. Choice of pet are not depended on the child's gender. On the other hand, dogs and cats were the most common pets. Boys preferred dogs, cats and birds, while girls preferred cats and birds.

This reaserch was conducted in the Arab society; future studies can extend this study to other cultures, such as comparison between the Arab and Jewish society in Israel. Other studies may examine other levels of schooling. Further, it's important to correlate these perceptions with violence, and to examine if positive attitudes towards pet may decrease violence, specifically in the middle level of schooling with the context of teenagers.

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**Appendix**

1. A pet brings joy and delight to the house :
2. A pet ruins the house’s belongings.
3. A pet is useful for the house’s residents
4. Animals’ normal habitant is either nature or zoos, not houses.
5. A pet is a friend of his owner.
6. Raising pets is a very great delight.
7. Pets are dirty and help spreading diseases to children.
8. Raising pets is a waste of time.
9. Raising pets is financially expensive
10. Keeping pets enhances children’s feelings of sympathy
11. Keeping pets enhances children’s sense of responsibility
12. Having pets at home could be harmful for children.
13. I treat my family members and pet equally
14. When having a pet we don’t feel lonely
15. When we feel upset we can talk to out pet and be comforted.
16. Keeping pets helps me explore scientific facts about them .
17. I punish my pet when I get angry
18. Pets have feelings and I respect them.
19. I can understand pets and meet their needs.
20. I like treating my pet nicely
21. Keeping pets enhances thinking abilities
22. Keeping pets teaches me facts about animal’s world.
23. did you get inspired by stories to love a specific type of pet ?
24. did you get influenced by stories to keep a pet at your house?
25. did you get motivated by stories to be sympathetic and caring towards pets ?