

## **Managing the Emotional Health of Dogs, Cats and Kids**

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There has been a plethora of information on the value to children of living with companion animals but this has concentrated on physical (less allergies) and behavioural (more outgoing etc.) factors rather than their emotional health (Casciotti and Zuckerman, 2016, Westgarth et al, 2010). Likewise much has been written about the physical dangers to children due to the presence of dogs in the household (De Keuster et al, 2006) but less about the effect of presence of children on the emotional health of companion animals in the home.

### **What is emotional health?**

Emotional health can be defined as a state of wellbeing - animals and people who are emotionally healthy can manage their feelings and behaviour. They may still be affected by stressful events but are better able to deal with them.

### **Children**

Several studies have identified that children benefit from contact with animals, to whom their emotional bonds appear very similar to those of people (Purewal et al, 2017) but also that young children are most likely to be injured by dogs (there has been much less interest in injuries by cats, perhaps because they are less serious). It is therefore useful to consider the developing emotions shown by children which influence their interactions with animals.

Until they are around 3 months it appears that babies simply feel states, pleasant or unpleasant, rather than emotions, and respond to them. Smiles in a newborn are simply a manifestation of neurological activity, not necessarily happiness. Between 3 and 6 months they begin to exhibit a simple range of emotions – happiness, sadness, anger and fear. At this age they begin to remember things relevant to them so can form expectations of what to expect in different situations. As they are non-verbal, we can only assess their emotions by observing their behaviour and making assumptions about how they feel much as we do with animals.

The toddler years are a time of enormous development both physically and emotionally. They are important for developing a sense of self, building relationships with their family (human and animal) and developing expectations about their world and their place in it. Social skills are developing to assist them in their relationships with others, and emotional skills which enable them to recognise and manage their feelings. Can they feel empathy? They can certainly show a recognition of the feelings of others, particularly if the situation is one they have experienced themselves. They learn best, however, when empathetic behaviour is modelled by adults.

As toddlers develop into pre-schoolers, their verbal ability expands so they can verbalise how they are feeling and begin to see situations from another person's perspective more easily. Adults can assist this by initiating discussions about how the child feels and how others, including animals, might be feeling, including eliciting ideas about how the child might help the other feel better.

Primary school children are developing more complex emotions, learning to identify and understand them and how to manage them appropriately. Their emotions are increasingly affected by thinking, which assists them to become more aware of their own feelings and better able to recognise, understand and respond to the feelings of others.

Throughout this process children are learning appropriate and inappropriate ways of expressing emotions according to the values and beliefs of firstly their parents and immediate family (some families and cultures encourage children to express their emotions but others discourage it). This development will therefore also be affected by the general physical and emotional health of their family members. When they begin school, sports and hobbies, they are increasingly influenced by a wider circle including teachers, coaches, fellow students etc. Most adults can remember a teacher or coach who has particularly influenced their thinking and behaviour.

The temperament of the child will also have an important effect - some feel emotions intensely and easily so can be more emotionally reactive and find it more difficult to develop strategies to manage their fears. More outgoing children are also more likely to be risk takers (Davis et al, 2012).

The following useful table is courtesy of [Kidsmatter.edu.au](http://Kidsmatter.edu.au). It is important to note that the rate of children's emotional development can be quite variable.

<b>Skills needed</b>	<b>Children with beginning skills</b>	<b>Children with developing skills</b>	<b>Children with more developed skills</b>
Emotional self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>tend to have one emotion at a time</li> <li>act out how they feel</li> <li>flip from one emotion to another quickly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>start to understand that they can have more than one emotion in reaction to the same event as long as they are similar (e.g. happy and excited)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>understand that they can have opposite feelings to the same situation (e.g. feel both happy and sad that the school year is ending)</li> </ul>
Recognising other people's emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>rely on physical clues to identify emotions (e.g. tears = sadness)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>take into account clues from the situation to help explain the emotion (e.g. understand that a child might be sad because his/her toy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>have a more complex understanding of the interaction between emotions, situations and people (e.g. the child is sad because the thing that was broken was a gift from a loved grandparent</li> </ul>

Skills needed	Children with beginning skills	Children with developing skills	Children with more developed skills
		has been broken.)	who died recently)
Emotion regulation – ie the ability to manage emotions effectively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are able to use simple ways to manage emotions with support from adults (e.g. choose a different activity to distract them from feeling frustrated)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are increasingly able to choose appropriate behavioural responses (e.g. asks and waits for assistance with difficult task)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are increasingly able to manage emotions by rethinking own goals and motives (e.g. decide that there is no point being angry about something he or she can't change)</li> </ul>

### *How can we support developing emotional health?*

All adults in contact with the child should pay attention to their emotions by observing their body language and behaviour, listening to what they are saying and the way they are saying it. We need to acknowledge how they feel and help them to understand and accept these feelings, and to develop effective strategies for managing them. Children need to understand that it is okay to have feelings, but that there are acceptable ways these should be expressed so limits must be set on aggressive, unsafe or inappropriate behaviours.

### *Applying this knowledge to interactions with animals.*

For newborns, we can allow them to see animals but should not allow or encourage any physical interactions beyond pointing out the animals to the baby. Older babies can exhibit a simple range of behaviours – some of these are easy to interpret e.g. anger, happiness but others are less so. Despite this, many parents put their babies in situations with animals, particularly dogs, in which concerning behaviour may be shown by either e.g. poking or hair tugging by the baby or displacement or escape behaviour on the part of the dog. The parents assume that the baby and the dog are enjoying the interaction and actually encourage this behaviour by the baby and expect the dog to accept it. The effects of this early exposure, positive or negative, on the baby's future behaviour towards animals are

unknown. Older babies have begun to crawl so often try to approach dogs and cats. This must be carefully managed so physical interaction does not happen - barriers like baby gates enable them to observe the family companion animals without stressing them.

It is doubtful if toddlers feel true empathy though they can certainly recognise the behaviour (feelings?) of others. But can they recognise the feelings of companion animals? There have been studies which have found that children of this age are unable to “read” dogs’ body language so the child may not be able to understand the animal’s feelings. All interactions therefore must be under the direct close supervision of adults. Although they may not be able to interpret body language, they can learn simple rules, behaviour can be pointed out and acted on under supervision e.g. the cat walks away so you shouldn’t follow it. Children can be encouraged to model the appropriate behaviour of adults but not relied upon to do so without supervision.

Preschoolers have now developed language so can be engaged in discussions about animals – while they still may not be able to recognise subtle differences in behaviour they can recognise basic signs after instruction using videos (Lakestani and Donaldson, 2015) and predict how they think the dog is feeling, the first step towards empathy. More research is needed, however, into whether they can extrapolate this to “real” dogs. They can therefore be encouraged to make predictions on possible consequences of their actions e.g. I can run up to Nana for a cuddle but not my cat as I might frighten him. If I grab the cat to cuddle him he might bite me.

When children reach school age education programs like Dog Safe™ and Blue Dog™ are most successful – children can recognise body language and use it to interpret the feelings of animals. The most important factor however is still the example set by their immediate family – if their parents and other adults model appropriate behaviour and how to train and manage animals children increasingly demonstrate it themselves. The self-control required to enable successful interactions and the gratification achieved by them also assist the development of the child’s own emotional health.

## **Dogs and Cats**

The Five Freedoms were developed for the UK Government by a group led by Professor Roger Brambell in 1965. These were initially directed at production animals then later applied to exotic and companion animals.

- freedom from hunger and thirst
- freedom from discomfort
- freedom from pain, injury and disease
- freedom to express normal behaviours
- freedom from fear and distress

Recently researchers in the area have rethought the Five Freedoms from a different perspective to positive welfare states (Mellor and Beausoleil, 2015). This concept of “what animals want” focuses on what resources or conditions animals would choose for themselves so could include

- access to appropriate shelter
- access to water and an appropriate amount of food which is nutritionally balanced and which the animal enjoys
- an environment that provides the opportunity for a social species to engage in the social activities it enjoys
- the ability to control its choices

If we wish to provide for the emotional health of companion animals this must be foremost in our minds.

## Dogs

Much has been written about dogs and children, usually about education and management of the child to reduce the risk of their being bitten. Trainers also focus, rightly, on selection, training and management of the dog for the same reason.

Dogs are a socially obligate species and their social circle can include not only dogs but also people and other animals, so, if we look at what dogs want, we need to include the ability to participate in the social interactions they enjoy. But how do we determine what they enjoy? And with whom?

Genetics play a part in the behaviour of dogs – a classic study by Dykman et al (1979) produced two lines of English Pointers, one normal and the other anxious despite the identical rearing and socialisation they received. Around the same time the seminal work in canine behavioural development was published by Scott and Fuller (1965) – they described “critical periods” and explained the effects of socialisation at different times in the pup’s development. They also described differences they observed in behaviour, despite identical rearing, of 5 breeds of dogs, Basenjis, Beagles, Cocker Spaniels, Shetland Sheepdogs and Wire Hair Fox Terriers. While they dealt with behaviour, rather than emotions, their observations provided the basis for later studies.

Herzog (2015) described how people choose dogs on appearance, even though they are aware of physical and behavioural issues described in that breed which could affect their relationship. Until we can change these criteria to include typical temperament and physical and emotional needs, however, we will continue to see mismatches between the emotional health of the dog and owner expectations. We cannot generalise “what dogs want” for all dogs or even all dogs within a breed – as for people it will vary with the dog based on their genetics, socialisation and subsequent experiences, but by careful research owners can optimise the likelihood that their needs and that of the dog will be met.

It is common practice to recommend standard lists to socialise puppies. Ian Dunbar’s list, for example, includes an extensive range of experiences with people, other dogs, places, noises etc, all to be ticked off in the first 5 weeks of ownership. While socialisation is important, it is also important to recognise the difference between habituation and sensitisation. This is not easy for novice owners, so, to ensure the pup’s emotional health is not compromised, this should be done under the supervision of an experienced trainer. Puppy classes can assist but can also create problems if not conducted very carefully by appropriately trained staff,

especially if children are involved. We know that this is the best time to socialise puppies to children (Arai et al, 2011) and it would also be a good time to teach parents about their pups' emotional needs and to recognise and respond to their body language.

We cannot assume they know this – Meints et al (2014) found that 17% of parents tested couldn't tell the difference between happy and highly stressed dogs and the researchers actually found that non-owners were more successful than owners in interpreting the emotional states of dogs! Arhant et al (2016) also found that many caregivers did not provide appropriate supervision or provide a safe place where the dog can rest so removing the dog's ability to make this choice. It is therefore vital that adults learn appropriate ways to train and manage their dogs which they can then model and actively teach to their children.

Several studies have found that many children under 5 are unable to differentiate between a "smiling" relaxed dog and the snarl of a concerned dog (Marshall-Pescini et al, 2009). The more subtle signs of concern are even harder for them to recognise. While education can improve their ability in tests utilising photos and videos, there are less data to support its ongoing success at home with the family dog so for these dogs a safe place is even more important.

Parents are often advised to use crates and baby gates for when they are unable to closely supervise interactions but this does not necessarily support the emotional health of the dog. If the dog is confined in a crate, however, they cannot avoid close proximity to the child, so may be concerned even if the child cannot touch them. There is also the likelihood that, if the barrier is secure, the parents may not feel the need to observe the dog and their response to the presence of the child.

A great deal has been written about the importance of exercise for dogs, especially breeds expected to be active e.g. working dogs. Owners need guidance on ways to provide this to assist their dogs' emotional health – does a dog living in the inner city actually enjoy walks where they may encounter people, traffic and other dogs? If not should a desensitisation and counterconditioning program be undertaken or should the dog's demonstrated concern be acted upon and an alternative means of enrichment be developed. The decision for the owner, and trainer assisting them, is whether short term emotional health should be compromised to achieve a desired long-term effect.

Australia is still very much the home of the backyard dog and if parents do not see their dog as a family member it is likely that they will see management from the point of view of convenience to them rather than to optimise the emotional health of the dog. As we discussed earlier parents are the most important model for the behaviour of their children so their behaviour will probably take precedence over any educational programs we can provide. Inappropriate attitudes and behaviour on the part of adults is further supported by the vast array of Facebook and You Tube videos depicting inappropriate and often dangerous interactions between children and dogs.

## **Cats**

While much has been written about dogs and kids, there is much less information about cats and kids. This is no doubt due to the fact that cats do not figure in the child injury statistics the way dogs do. While studies show that many children (and often their parents) cannot accurately interpret the emotions of dogs, it is even less likely they can understand and respond appropriately to cats. Cats' body language is less well understood and their behaviour more subtle. In fact, knowledge of dog body language can be counterproductive

when dealing with a cat whose swishing tail indicates a very different emotion to the wagging tail of a dog.

Their social behaviour is quite different too – cats can live in groups but not usually with the level of sociability seen in dogs. While most dogs fit easily into the family and welcome human company, domestic cats vary greatly in the amount of interaction they prefer – this may include frequent close contact or only approaching to be fed. They often prefer to interact with a particular family member and, if there are children in the family, the cat may be more likely to interact with adults. Children tend to approach a cat more often than adults which most cats do not appreciate.

Interactions between cats and their humans may be often but they are usually short though those initiated by the cat are generally of a longer duration. Low intensity interactions are usually preferred by the cat.

Recent studies have described the effect of stress, particularly long-term stress, on feline health. While this is of particular interest for cats held in veterinary practices and shelters, its effect on domestic cats, particularly these kept wholly indoors, may be less obvious. Given the mismatch between the expectations of many children of their relationship with their cat and the reality of the cat's preferences, it is likely that some cats may find the presence of children stressful if the children are not adequately supervised and the cat does not have multiple available hiding places inaccessible to the children. Even if hiding places are available, while they allow the cat to avoid contact with the children they may interfere with the cat's desire to interact with other family members or to utilise the space available in the rest of the house. This can have serious implications for their emotional health.

## **Conclusion**

Australia has one of the highest rates of companion animal ownership in the world. Unfortunately this is accompanied by an unacceptable rate of child injuries. Programs are available to educate preschool and school aged children on correct interaction with dogs but they often focus on what not to do and ignore cats completely. Councils have attempted to resolve the issue by restrictive legislation instead of going to the crux of the matter. Education of parents is paramount on how to manage their children and animals to optimize the emotional health of all.

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