

The role of pets in youth's subjective well-being

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Thematic importance: Little research exists on the role of pets in supporting positive youth development. The current study focused on youth's experiences with pets in relation to subjective well-being. Young people were involved in creating a survey assessing youth's experiences with pets and how these experiences might positively or negatively impact their well-being. Policy makers' and practitioners' responses to the data have highlighted the need to consider the practical implications of the relationship between youth and their pets, and for young people's rights and needs to be considered when it comes to decision-making about youth and their pets.

Introduction and objectives: The study was conducted by a non-profit research agency in British Columbia (BC), Canada and their Youth Research Academy (a group of youth aged 16–24 with government care experience), in partnership with a local animal foundation. The study aimed to improve our understanding of youth's experiences with pets and to identify how youth can be best supported to care for their pets in order to promote their well-being.

Method: This study included data from the population-level 2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS; n=38,015 students aged 12–19). The BC AHS is a general youth health survey and includes one item pertaining to pets (whether youth take care of a pet on a typical school day). Data from this indicator was an impetus to explore the topic in greater detail. Members of the Youth Research Academy worked with researchers, youth social service agencies, and experts in the field of animal welfare to create a survey about young people's experiences with pets. Survey items included connectedness to pets, caretaking responsibilities, and subjective well-being. The survey was completed by 515 youth aged 12–24.

Results: Most youth with pets reported that having one improved their overall well-being (84%), mental health (78%), and sense of responsibility (77%) and purpose (71%). Youth with the most responsibility for their pets reported the highest subjective well-being ratings. Also, 57% of youth with pets reported that having their pet reduced their screen time. These youth were more likely to indicate improvements in their mental health (85% vs. 68% who reported no such change in screen time), sense of purpose (81% vs. 58%), and physical health (54% vs. 30%) which they directly attributed to having their pet. However, youth who were worried about financial costs of caring for their pet were more likely to experience extreme stress (56% vs. 20%) and lower life satisfaction (e.g., 44% felt they had a good life vs. 68% who were not worried about pet-related financial costs).

Conclusions and implications: The findings have increased awareness of the important role that pets can play in young people's lives, and how youth with pets can be better supported. Findings shared with statutory and non-statutory service providers have resulted in steps being taken to improve services to youth with pets. Another outcome of this project is that a rights- and responsibilities-based curriculum and resources pertaining to pets are currently being delivered to school-aged children.