

PET DOG OWNERSHIP IN FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM:
CHILDREN'S SOCIAL SKILLS AND ATTACHMENT TO THEIR DOGS

Gretchen K. Carlisle

Dr. Rebecca A. Johnson, Dissertation Supervisor

Abstract

This study compared the social skills of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder who lived with dogs and those who did not live with dogs. Interaction with dogs was investigated in this population, along with the attachment of those children who lived with dogs. This cross-sectional, descriptive study was conducted using a telephone survey. Seventy caregivers rated their child using the Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scale, and responded to open-ended questions regarding their child's interaction with dogs. Children living with dogs completed the Companion Animal Bonding Scale. Two-sample t-tests were used for comparison of children with and without dogs. Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the qualitative data. In seven of eight social skill areas, the mean social skill scores of children with dogs were greater than for those without dogs. Eighty-nine percent of parents with dogs described their child as "*very attached*" and children reported high bonding to their dogs using the CABS. Parents indicated the benefits of dog ownership for their child with ASD were companionship, unconditional love and responsibility opportunities. The findings suggest that dog ownership may be beneficial for some children with ASD.

Key Words: Autism, dog ownership, social skills, attachment, children