

The Paws & Connect Theory of Change

The Paws & Connect Theory of Change is built upon a simple but powerful belief: **safe, trusting relationships create the conditions in which healthy development can occur**

The following sections explain how each stage of the Theory of Change contributes to this process.

1. Safe, trusting relationships are fundamental to healthy development

Every meaningful relationship begins with a sense of safety. Young people who have experienced adversity, loss or inconsistent relationships may find it difficult to trust others. Rather than expecting immediate change, Paws & Connect begins by creating opportunities for calm, predictable interactions with an animal whose behaviour is patient, accepting and free from judgement.

Animals do not ask young people to explain themselves, defend themselves or earn acceptance. Instead, they respond to kindness, consistency and care. These repeated experiences help create an emotionally safe environment in which trust can gradually emerge.

Importantly, this relationship does not replace human relationships. Instead, it becomes one part of a broader network of supportive connections involving family members, carers, rescue volunteers and the wider community.

2. Trust Opens the Door to Connection

As safety develops, genuine connection becomes possible. Trust allows young people to become emotionally available in ways that may previously have felt difficult or unsafe. Caring for an animal encourages regular interaction, shared routines and mutual responsiveness.

Through these everyday experiences, young people begin to experience themselves as capable of nurturing another living being while also receiving companionship, affection and acceptance in return.

Connection is therefore not viewed as an outcome in itself but as the pathway through which many other developmental processes begin.

3. Connection Supports Healthy Development

Healthy development is not a single event but an ongoing process.

As relationships strengthen, young people often begin developing greater confidence, emotional regulation, empathy, responsibility and self-belief.

These experiences are consistent with what developmental science tells us about the importance of secure relationships in building resilience and supporting psychological wellbeing.

Rather than attempting to "fix" young people, Paws & Connect focuses on creating environments in which positive development is more likely to occur naturally. Growth occurs through experience, not instruction.

4. Healthy Development Builds Resilience

Over time, repeated positive experiences help strengthen protective factors. Young people begin developing confidence in themselves, confidence in others and confidence in their ability to manage life's challenges. Supportive relationships also increase a sense of belonging and purpose—both recognised protective factors against poor mental health. Resilience is therefore understood not as an individual personality trait but as something that grows through supportive relationships and positive life experiences.

5. Positive Outcomes Strengthen the Whole System

As young people grow, the benefits extend beyond the individual. Families often experience improved relationships. Rescue organisations gain successful foster carers and adoptive homes. Companion animals experience safety, stability and belonging. Communities benefit when young people become more connected, engaged and confident.

These outcomes reinforce one another, creating a positive cycle in which stronger relationships lead to healthier individuals, healthier families and healthier communities.

Long-Term Impact

The ultimate aim of Paws & Connect is to contribute to a future where more young people experience the kind of safe, trusting relationships that support lifelong resilience, wellbeing and belonging.

By bringing together vulnerable young people, rescued companion animals, families and community organisations, Paws & Connect seeks to create lasting change through the simple but profound power of connection.