

Proposition 3: Connection Supports Healthy Development.

Connection Supports Healthy Development: The Role of Relationships with Rescued Companion Animals

Abstract Healthy development in young people is fundamentally relational. This paper argues that meaningful, repeated connection with a rescued companion animal provides a powerful developmental context that fosters emotional regulation, social and emotional competence, resilience, self-efficacy, and identity. Drawing on developmental neuroscience, ecological systems theory, sociocultural theory, self-determination theory, and resilience science, the paper examines the mechanisms through which connection operates. Rather than treating connection merely as a contributor to wellbeing, it positions connection as the medium in which key developmental capacities emerge. Importantly, development occurs not only because the young person receives care and connection, but because they also provide it. In caring for another vulnerable living being, they experience themselves as capable, valued, and trusted. Evidence from human–animal interaction research is integrated to illustrate how this mutual process supports empathy, perspective-taking, responsibility, trust, agency, and belonging. Implications for practice and future research are considered.

Keywords: human–animal interaction, youth development, resilience, self-efficacy, relatedness, companion animals

Introduction

Relationships shape the developing brain, the acquisition of social and emotional competencies, the capacity for resilience, and the formation of a coherent sense of self. For many young people, particularly those who have experienced adversity, disconnection, or limited opportunities for consistent, positive relational experiences, a relationship with a rescued companion animal can offer a unique and accessible form of connection.

This paper advances a developmental argument: connection does not simply improve wellbeing; it becomes the context in which development occurs. Children and adolescents do not first develop confidence and then form relationships; confidence often develops *within* relationships. Empathy develops through connecting. Responsibility develops through caring. Trust develops through being trusted. Identity develops through belonging.

Crucially, development occurs not only because the young person receives care and connection, but because they also provide it. In caring for another vulnerable living

being, they experience themselves as capable, needed, and trusted. This reciprocal quality of the relationship—receiving acceptance while actively offering care—is central to the developmental power of human–animal connection.

The focus here is on relationships between young people and rescued companion animals. Such relationships involve mutual care, routine, responsiveness, and acceptance. They create repeated positive interactions that, over time, strengthen neural pathways involved in emotional regulation, learning, and social functioning, while also building social-emotional skills, resilience, self-belief, and a sense of agency.

Relationships Build the Developing Brain

Early and ongoing relational experiences shape brain architecture. Sensitive, responsive interactions help organise neural systems that support emotion regulation, stress recovery, attention, and social cognition (Schorre, 2005; Center on the Developing Child, 2016). Repeated positive interactions strengthen synaptic connections and circuits involved in these processes; conversely, chronic stress or relational deprivation can disrupt them.

When a young person engages in consistent, reciprocal interactions with a companion animal—feeding, walking, soothing, playing, reading body language, and responding to needs—these everyday exchanges provide opportunities for practice in co-regulation, attention to another’s signals, and recovery from mild frustration or disappointment. Over time, such experiences contribute to the strengthening of pathways that support emotional regulation, learning, and social functioning. The animal’s non-judgemental presence and predictable needs create a relatively low-threat relational environment in which the young person can rehearse regulatory and relational skills.

Relationships Develop Social and Emotional Competence

Social and emotional competence is not innate; it develops through repeated relational experience. Connection with a companion animal offers concrete opportunities to practise and internalise a range of capacities:

- Empathy and perspective-taking: Attending to an animal’s cues (body language, vocalisations, behaviour) requires the young person to consider another’s internal state and needs.
- Communication: Interpreting and responding to non-verbal signals builds observational and responsive communication skills.
- Emotional regulation: Caring for an animal involves managing one’s own frustration, impatience, or disappointment when routines are disrupted or progress is slow.

- Cooperation and reciprocity: The relationship is inherently reciprocal—the animal depends on the young person, and the young person receives companionship, acceptance, and often affection in return.
- Compassion and responsibility: Daily care (feeding, exercise, hygiene, veterinary needs) cultivates a sense of duty toward a vulnerable other.
- Trust: Being consistently relied upon by the animal, and experiencing the animal's growing trust, supports the young person's capacity to trust and be trusted.

These competencies emerge through practice within the relationship rather than through didactic instruction alone. Research on human–animal interaction has linked pet ownership and stronger bonds with animals to higher empathy, prosocial orientation, and social competence in children and adolescents (Purewal et al., 2017; Mueller, 2014).

Relationships Foster Resilience

Ann S. Masten's extensive body of work on resilience emphasises that resilience is not a rare or extraordinary trait. It arises largely from “ordinary magic”—the everyday protective systems of human development, especially caring relationships (Masten, 2001, 2014, 2025). The single most consistent predictor of resilience across diverse adversities is the presence of supportive relationships with competent, caring others.

A young person does not necessarily require a dramatic therapeutic intervention. What may be most needed are repeated experiences of caring for, and being accepted by, another living being. A relationship with a rescued companion animal can supply precisely this: consistency, acceptance, opportunities to contribute, and a sense of being needed. These ordinary relational processes help mobilise adaptive systems that protect and restore positive development under conditions of risk or adversity (Masten, 2001; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Relationships Strengthen Self-Belief and Identity

Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory places self-efficacy—beliefs about one's capacity to organise and execute actions required to produce desired outcomes—at the centre of human agency (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Self-efficacy develops primarily through mastery experiences, but also through vicarious experience, social persuasion, and interpretation of physiological and affective states.

Successfully caring for a companion animal provides repeated mastery experiences: the animal is fed, walked, calmed, or trained; progress is visible; the young person can observe the direct results of their actions. These experiences strengthen self-efficacy, a sense of competence, confidence, and agency. Young people begin to internalise the belief “I can do this.” That shift is developmentally powerful. It supports persistence,

goal-directed behaviour, and a more positive identity as someone who is capable and responsible.

Importantly, this growth in self-belief is not solely the product of receiving care or praise. It arises in significant part from the act of providing care. When a young person is trusted with the wellbeing of a vulnerable animal and succeeds in meeting that responsibility, they experience themselves as capable, needed, and trusted—an experience that directly fuels a stronger, more agentic sense of self.

Connection as the Context of Development

A subtle but profound distinction is required. Connection is often framed as something that improves wellbeing after development has occurred. A stronger developmental claim is that connection is the medium through which development itself takes place.

Higher psychological functions, as Lev Vygotsky argued, first appear between people (interpsychologically) and only later become internal capacities (intrapsychologically) (Vygotsky, 1978). While Vygotsky focused on human social interaction and cultural tools, the broader principle—that growth is fostered through responsive, repeated interaction—applies to the relational experiences described here. The young person first practises regulation, perspective-taking, responsibility, and care *in relation to* the animal; these capacities are gradually internalised.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model further clarifies why duration and consistency matter. Proximal processes—progressively more complex reciprocal interactions between an active developing person and the persons, objects, and symbols in the immediate environment—are the primary engines of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These processes must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time to be effective. A consistent relationship with a companion animal constitutes precisely such a proximal process within the young person's microsystem.

Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's Self-Determination Theory identifies three basic psychological needs essential for flourishing: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Meaningful connection with a companion animal can help satisfy the need for relatedness (feeling connected and cared for). Caring for the animal builds competence. When the young person is supported to make meaningful choices within the care relationship (how to approach training, which activities to share, how to respond to the animal's preferences), the need for autonomy is also supported. Need satisfaction, in turn, promotes autonomous motivation, wellbeing, and continued growth.

Developmental Mechanisms: What Develops Because of Connection

The mechanisms can be organised across domains of development, all of which emerge through connection:

Emotional development Emotional regulation, feeling safe, reduction of loneliness, co-regulation, and recognition of emotions in self and other.

Social development Empathy, trust, communication, reciprocity, perspective-taking, and compassion.

Cognitive development Problem-solving (e.g., interpreting behaviour, adjusting care routines), planning, learning routines, responsibility, and aspects of executive functioning.

Identity development Self-worth, belonging, confidence, purpose, and agency.

Behavioural development Persistence, consistency, caring behaviours, responsibility, and self-control.

These capacities do not appear automatically; they are practised and consolidated within the ongoing relationship.

Conclusion

Connecting young people with rescued companion animals is not merely a wellbeing intervention. It creates a relational context in which fundamental developmental processes can unfold. Through repeated positive interactions, neural systems supporting regulation and social functioning are strengthened; social and emotional competencies are practised and internalised; resilience is fostered through ordinary supportive relationships; self-efficacy and a sense of agency are built through mastery experiences; and basic psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy can be satisfied.

The developmental argument is stronger than the claim that “connection is good for wellbeing.” Connection is the medium through which confidence, empathy, responsibility, trust, and identity develop. Development occurs not only because the young person receives care and connection, but because they also provide it. In caring for another vulnerable living being, they experience themselves as capable, needed, and trusted. When that connection involves a rescued animal, the young person also participates in a relationship characterised by mutual vulnerability and care—an experience that can be especially meaningful for those whose human relational environments have been disrupted or limited.

Future research should continue to examine the quality of the human–animal bond, the role of supported choice and scaffolding by adults, and the long-term developmental trajectories associated with such relationships. Practitioners and policy-makers would

do well to recognise companion animals not simply as sources of comfort, but as potential partners in the ordinary, powerful work of healthy development.

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