

Why Rescue Animals?

Ethical, Developmental, and Welfare Foundations for Matching Rescue Animals with Adolescents

Paws & Connect

1. Introduction — Why This Question Matters

Paws & Connect is a not-for-profit organisation that deliberately matches rescue animals with young people, primarily adolescents, and their families. The central question guiding this paper is straightforward yet consequential: why has Paws & Connect chosen to work specifically with rescue animals? This is not an argument that rescue animals are inherently “better” animals, more empathetic, or uniquely suited to young people. Nor is it a claim that every rescue animal should be placed with an adolescent. Rather, the paper examines the ethical, developmental, and animal-welfare reasoning that underpins a deliberate organisational choice to work through the rescue pathway.

The organisation’s position can be summarised as follows. Human–animal relationships can be meaningful and may contribute to connection and healthy development during adolescence. Adolescence itself is a significant developmental period in which relationships, identity, autonomy, and belonging are evolving. Paws & Connect seeks to create mutually beneficial relationships with animals already in the care of rescue organisations, while supporting animal welfare and the capacity of those organisations. Rescue status alone is not sufficient: individual characteristics, welfare, temperament, the young person, the family, the environment, and ongoing support all matter. The objective is not merely to place an animal; it is to create the conditions for a safe, sustainable relationship. Critically, Paws & Connect does not assume that rescue animals have experienced trauma, that they are emotionally damaged, or that they inherently require someone to “save” them. The word “rescue” describes a pathway into care; it does not describe an animal’s personality or determine its capacity for relationships.

This paper develops empirical and theoretical support for these propositions. It draws on research concerning the human–animal bond, adolescent development, animal welfare, and matching practices, while remaining clear about the limits of current evidence for the specific Paws & Connect model.

2. Animals as Partners, Not Tools

Any serious consideration of placing animals with young people must begin with an ethical foundation: the animal has intrinsic welfare interests and is not simply a means of achieving outcomes for a young person. Treating animals as instruments risks subordinating their needs to human goals and can lead to placements that compromise welfare. Contemporary animal-welfare frameworks emphasise that animals under human care should experience positive welfare states, not merely the absence of negative ones (Mellor et al., 2020). This includes opportunities for appropriate social contact, environmental control, and the expression of species-typical behaviours.

Paws & Connect therefore approaches the animal as a partner in a potential relationship rather than as a therapeutic tool or developmental resource. The organisation's matching philosophy requires that the animal's welfare is an outcome in its own right, not a secondary consideration. This stance is consistent with broader ethical literature on human–animal relationships, which argues against reducing non-human animals to instruments for human benefit (e.g., Giroux, Pepper, & Voigt, 2023). It also aligns with practical guidance in animal-assisted contexts that emphasises attention to animal behaviour, stress indicators, welfare and suitability for the environment (Fine et al., 2019).

This ethical posture has practical consequences. It means that sometimes the appropriate outcome is not placement. An animal whose temperament, health, or history indicates that a particular household would not support good welfare should not be matched, regardless of the young person's needs or desires. Mutual benefit is the standard; unilateral benefit for the human participant is not.

3. Why Human–Animal Relationships May Matter During Adolescence

Adolescence is a period of significant developmental change involving identity formation, increasing autonomy, shifting peer relationships, and the renegotiation of family bonds (Steinberg, 2014). Relationships during this period can serve as important contexts for emotional regulation, belonging, and the practice of care and responsibility. Research on the human–animal bond suggests that companion animals can form part of these relational contexts for many young people.

Systematic reviews indicate associations between pet ownership and a range of emotional and social outcomes in childhood and adolescence, including reduced loneliness, higher self-esteem, and increased social competence in some studies, although findings are mixed and often limited by methodological constraints (Purewal et al., 2017). More recent longitudinal work has emphasised that the quality of the relationship, rather than mere ownership, appears more relevant. High relationship satisfaction with a pet has been associated with more favourable trajectories of loneliness and related socio-emotional indicators in early adolescence, whereas simple frequency of interaction has shown weaker or null associations (Mueller et al., 2024).

Theoretical work has begun to integrate animals into relational developmental systems models of youth development. A recent meta-synthesis proposes that youth–animal coactions may function as ecological assets within young people's social-emotional development, provided the qualitative features of the interaction support mutual well-being (Flynn et al., 2025). Pets may offer non-judgmental companionship, opportunities for nurturance and responsibility, and a form of social support that is distinct from peer or parental relationships (King et al., 2023). These potential contributions are particularly salient during adolescence, when young people are navigating identity, belonging, and emotional regulation.

Importantly, the literature does not support a simple causal claim that pets produce better developmental outcomes. Selection effects, family context, and individual differences all matter. The evidence is best understood as indicating that meaningful, reciprocal relationships with animals can form part of a supportive developmental ecology for some young people, under conditions that also protect the animal's welfare.

4. Why Specifically Rescue Animals?

This section is the heart of the paper. Paws & Connect has deliberately chosen the rescue pathway for several interrelated reasons. These reasons do not rest on claims of superiority of rescue animals as a category; they rest on alignment between the organisation's human-development purpose and existing animal-welfare needs, and on the practical and ethical advantages of partnership with established rescue organisations.

4.1 Animal Welfare and Existing Need

There are already animals in the community who require appropriate homes. If Paws & Connect can responsibly contribute to finding suitable homes for some of those animals, introducing another animal into the system when an appropriate rescue animal may already exist raises a legitimate philosophical and practical question. This is not a claim that all rescue animals need homes in a simplistic sense, nor that placement is automatically beneficial. Appropriate placement is the key. The principle is one of contributing to existing welfare needs rather than generating new demand for animals when suitable candidates already exist within the rescue system.

4.2 Existing Welfare and Assessment Infrastructure

A particularly strong argument for the partnership model is that rescue organisations may possess valuable knowledge of an animal's history, health, behaviour, temperament, previous placements and needs, depending on the information available and the length of time the animal has been in their care. Paws & Connect does not propose to acquire animals independently and then determine suitability. Instead, it works with established rescue organisations that maintain assessment and welfare processes. This provides access to animal-welfare expertise that the organisation should not attempt to replicate. Partnership respects the specialised knowledge of rescue staff and foster networks and reduces the risk of placing animals whose needs are poorly understood.

4.3 Potential Convergence of Needs

Young people and families may seek connection, companionship, responsibility, and a meaningful relationship. Rescue organisations care for animals that require appropriate, stable, and loving homes. These needs may intersect. The word “may” is doing important conceptual work. The proposition is not that young people need animals and rescue animals need young people in a general sense. It is that, where the needs, capacities, and characteristics of the individuals align, there may be an opportunity for a mutually beneficial relationship. This formulation is consistent with a matching philosophy that treats compatibility as an empirical and relational question rather than an assumed category-level fit.

4.4 Opportunity for Reciprocal Benefit

Instead of asking solely “What can this animal do for the young person?”, Paws & Connect asks what each participant might gain from the relationship and what each requires from the other. The young person may experience companionship, connection, responsibility, confidence, or belonging. The animal may experience stability, appropriate care, security, and a permanent or long-term home. The family becomes part of that relationship system, and the rescue organisation remains a partner supporting the animal’s welfare. This is a different proposition from an animal-assisted intervention in which the animal is primarily a means to a therapeutic end. Reciprocity and mutual benefit are the orienting principles.

The decision to work through rescue organisations is therefore not based on an assumption that rescue animals are inherently preferable to animals acquired through other responsible pathways. Rather, it reflects the particular purpose of Paws & Connect. Where an appropriately assessed rescue animal can meet the needs of a young person and family, while simultaneously providing a safe and stable home for an animal already requiring placement, the organisation considers this a meaningful alignment of human-development and animal-welfare objectives.

5. Moving Beyond Assumptions About Rescue Animals

A common but problematic narrative often attaches to rescue animals: that they have all gone through trauma, that they have “had a hard life and need love,” and that this experience somehow parallels the adversity some young people have faced. This narrative is emotionally appealing. It can motivate compassion and create a sense of shared journey. Paws & Connect explicitly does not rely on it.

Rescue status does not tell us who an animal is. An animal may enter rescue because its owner died, because a family could no longer care for it, because of a move or financial circumstances, because of behavioural difficulties, because it was surrendered, or because it was found as a stray. These are completely different histories. Two animals with entirely different pathways into care may be equally suitable—or equally unsuitable—matches for a particular

young person and family. The word “rescue” describes a pathway into care; it does not describe personality, emotional capacity, or relational potential.

Rejecting the trauma narrative protects the organisation from anthropomorphism and from treating either the young person or the animal as a problem that the other is supposed to fix. It also protects animals from being selected or rejected on the basis of assumed emotional damage rather than individual assessment. Matching decisions rest on temperament, health, behaviour, environmental fit, and the capacities of the household, not on a story about shared adversity.

6. Mutual Benefit and Animal Welfare

Mutual benefit requires that the animal’s welfare is treated as an outcome in its own right. Safeguarding against unintended harm is therefore central. Placement into a household that cannot meet the animal’s needs—whether because of time, knowledge, environment, or the young person’s capacity at a given stage—can produce stress, behavioural deterioration, or eventual return to rescue. Research on shelter and rescue outcomes suggests that elements of matching practices are associated with return rates and length of stay; programs that carefully assess compatibility before showing animals tend to be associated with better placement stability (Reese, 2021).

Working with rescue animals does not, in itself, guarantee a positive welfare outcome. A poorly matched rescue placement can be harmful to an animal just as a poorly matched placement obtained through another pathway can be. The welfare value of the rescue pathway therefore depends on the quality of assessment, matching, preparation, and ongoing support.

Consistent with this evidence and with the organisation’s matching philosophy, Paws & Connect accepts that sometimes the appropriate outcome is not placement. An animal may require a different type of home, a more experienced carer, or continued foster care. A young person or family may not yet be ready. Declining a match in such cases is not a failure; it is an expression of the principle that neither participant should be treated as a tool for the other.

7. Why Rescue Organisations Matter

Paws & Connect partners with rescue organisations rather than attempting to become an animal rescue organisation itself. This division of roles is intentional. Rescue organisations bring specialised expertise in intake assessment, health and behavioural evaluation, foster management, and the complex decisions that surround rehoming. Many established rescue organisations have systems for monitoring welfare and responding when placements do not succeed. By partnering, Paws & Connect gains access to this infrastructure and avoids diluting its own focus on relationship matching, family readiness, and ongoing support for the human–animal relationship.

Partnership also supports the capacity of rescue organisations. Finding carefully matched, supported homes can contribute to positive outcomes for animals and may help relieve capacity pressures within the rescue system. The relationship is reciprocal: Paws & Connect relies on rescue expertise; rescues gain access to a pathway that prioritises compatibility and post-placement support.

8. Families, Caregiving and the Relationship Environment

The animal is not being placed into a relationship with an adolescent in isolation. The family and the broader caregiving environment form part of the relationship system. Household routines, the presence and attitudes of other family members, physical environment, and the distribution of care responsibilities all influence whether a placement is safe and sustainable. Research on companion animals in families indicates that the animal is embedded within a broader multi-person system, meaning that the family environment can influence the development and sustainability of the human–animal relationship (Melson, 2003; King et al., 2023).

Assessment of family readiness is therefore essential. This includes realistic understanding of the animal’s needs, willingness to share care responsibilities, capacity to manage challenges, and commitment to ongoing support. A placement that works well for a young person but overburdens parents or other carers is unlikely to be sustainable and may ultimately harm the animal’s welfare.

9. What Paws & Connect Does — and Does Not — Claim

Clarity about claims is essential for ethical practice and for the integrity of the organisation's evidence base. The following distinctions are intentional.

What the evidence supports. Research on the human–animal bond and on adolescent development indicates that relationships with companion animals can be meaningful and may contribute to connection, emotional regulation, and social-emotional development for some young people, particularly when relationship quality is high. Animal-welfare research and shelter practice literature support careful matching and the principle that welfare is an outcome in its own right.

What is plausible but still requires evaluation. The specific model of matching rescue animals with adolescents through a structured partnership with rescue organisations, with attention to mutual benefit and ongoing support, is conceptually coherent and consistent with existing evidence. Direct empirical evaluation of outcomes for both young people and animals within the Paws & Connect model is currently limited or emerging. The organisation should evaluate rather than assume effectiveness.

What Paws & Connect does not claim. The organisation does not claim that its model is a clinical treatment or a substitute for mental-health services. It does not assume that rescue animals are therapeutic by virtue of their rescue status. It does not claim that every match will produce measurable developmental gains. It does not treat animals as interventions or young people as problems to be fixed by an animal.

These boundaries protect both participants and maintain intellectual honesty about the state of the evidence.

10. Implications for Practice

If the preceding ethical considerations and evidence are accepted, several implications follow for how Paws & Connect operates.

Relationship matching. Matching decisions prioritise compatibility of temperament, needs, lifestyle, and environment over category membership (rescue versus other). Individual assessment of both the animal and the household is required.

Assessment. Assessment draws on the expertise of partner rescue organisations regarding the animal and includes structured consideration of family readiness, caregiving capacity, and environmental suitability.

Family readiness. The family system is treated as integral to the relationship. Placement proceeds only when the household as a whole can support the animal's welfare and the young person's engagement.

Animal welfare. Welfare is an outcome in its own right. Non-placement is an acceptable and sometimes necessary result of careful assessment.

Ongoing support. The organisation's responsibility does not end at placement. Support for the developing relationship, monitoring of welfare, and pathways for assistance if difficulties arise are part of the model.

11. Conclusion

Paws & Connect does not choose rescue animals because they are assumed to be damaged, unusually empathetic, or somehow inherently better for young people. It chooses the rescue pathway because it creates an opportunity to bring together human connection, animal welfare, appropriate homes, rescue expertise, and carefully supported relationships—without treating either participant as a tool for fixing the other.

The organisation's stance can be restated in the form of four linked propositions. Human–animal relationships can matter. Adolescence is a developmental period in which relationships are especially salient. Rescue animals and rescue organisations offer a pathway that aligns developmental purpose with existing welfare need. And rescue status is never enough on its own: matching, mutual benefit, family context, and ongoing support determine whether a relationship is safe and sustainable.

This paper has aimed to provide theoretical and empirical grounding for these propositions while remaining clear about the limits of current evidence for the specific model. The next step for the organisation is rigorous evaluation of outcomes for both young people and animals, so that practice continues to be informed by evidence rather than by assumption.

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