

A literature review and analysis of young person and companion animal matching.

Careful Matching of Young People, Companion Animals, and Support Environments: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations for Safe, Enduring, and Mutually Beneficial Relationships

Abstract This paper examines the proposition that careful matching of a young person, a companion animal, and the surrounding support environment increases the likelihood of a safe, enduring, and mutually beneficial relationship. Drawing on Person–Environment Fit theory, Thomas and Chess’s goodness-of-fit model, animal behaviour science, pet adoption outcome research, foster-care matching studies, supported decision-making principles, and research on shared activities, the paper demonstrates convergent evidence across multiple domains. The central conclusion is that intentional congruence among the young person’s temperament and lifestyle, the animal’s behavioural profile, and the supportive context reduces risk of relationship breakdown, improves welfare for both parties, and strengthens attachment and positive outcomes.

Keywords: person–environment fit, goodness of fit, human–animal bond, pet adoption, matching, youth, animal welfare

Introduction

Companion animals can provide adolescents with companionship, emotional regulation, opportunities for responsibility, and shared positive experiences. However, not all placements succeed. High rates of relinquishment, behavioural problems, and relationship dissolution remain common when animals and people are paired without systematic attention to compatibility (New et al., 2000; Salman et al., 1998). The proposition examined here is that *careful matching*—of the young person’s characteristics, the companion animal’s temperament and needs, and the support environment—substantially increases the probability of a safe, enduring, and mutually beneficial relationship.

This claim is not domain-specific. It is supported by convergent evidence from organisational and developmental psychology, animal behaviour science, adoption research, child welfare, and person-centred practice. The paper reviews these strands in turn and shows how they converge on the same practical conclusion.

Person–Environment Fit Theory

Person–Environment (P–E) Fit theory provides the overarching conceptual framework. Originating in the work of French, Rodgers, and Cobb (1974) and elaborated by Caplan and others (Caplan, 1983, 1987; French et al., 1982), the theory holds that positive outcomes—satisfaction, adjustment, health, and performance—are maximised when the characteristics of the person match the characteristics of the environment. Misfit produces strain, dissatisfaction, and poorer functioning.

Two complementary forms of fit are typically distinguished: *needs–supplies fit* (the environment supplies what the person needs) and *demands–abilities fit* (the person's capacities meet environmental demands). Both objective and subjective fit matter; perceived congruence often predicts outcomes more strongly than objective measures alone (Edwards et al., 1998).

Although developed primarily in occupational and organisational contexts, the logic of P–E Fit has been applied successfully to schools, mental-health settings, disability services, aged care, and foster care. Extending it to the human–animal–environment triad is straightforward. The “person” is the young person (temperament, activity preferences, attachment style, lifestyle constraints); the “environment” includes both the companion animal (species, individual temperament, activity level, stress tolerance, social needs) and the broader support system (family, housing, professional guidance, resources). When these elements align, the relationship is more likely to be stable and rewarding for both parties. When they do not, stress, behavioural problems, and eventual breakdown become more probable.

Goodness of Fit (Thomas & Chess)

A closely related and particularly useful developmental formulation is the goodness-of-fit concept developed by Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess from the New York Longitudinal Study (Thomas & Chess, 1977; Chess & Thomas, 1999). Their central insight was that children do not thrive because they possess one ideal temperament. They thrive when their temperament is compatible with the demands and opportunities of their environment.

Thomas and Chess identified nine temperament dimensions (activity level, rhythmicity, approach/withdrawal, adaptability, intensity, threshold of responsiveness, quality of mood, distractibility, and attention span/persistence) and three broad constellations (easy, difficult, and slow-to-warm-up). Crucially, they argued that “goodness of fit results when the properties of the environment and its expectations and demands are in accord with the organism's own capacities, characteristics, and style of behaving” (Chess & Thomas, 1999, p. 3). Poor fit produces friction, behavioural difficulties, and suboptimal development.

The same principle maps directly onto young person–animal matching. An active, high-energy adolescent is likely to experience more positive interactions with a similarly energetic dog that enjoys walking, hiking, or fetch. A shy or anxious young person may form a more secure and low-stress bond with a calm, predictable, affectionate cat or older dog that seeks quiet proximity rather than high-arousal play. Matching activity level, sociability, fearfulness, and preferred interaction style creates repeated opportunities for positive reinforcement of the relationship and reduces the chronic stress that arises from continual mismatch.

Animal Behaviour Science

Individual differences in companion animals are substantial and relatively stable. Research on dogs and cats has identified reliable dimensions including sociability (toward humans and conspecifics), fearfulness/shyness–boldness, activity/playfulness, aggression, trainability, attachment style, and stress responsiveness (Mikkola et al., 2021; Salonen et al., 2020; Gartner, 2015). Breed differences exist but individual variation within breeds is large; early socialisation, prior experience, and current environment further shape expression.

Mismatches on these dimensions predict poorer outcomes. High-energy dogs placed in low-activity households frequently develop behavioural problems linked to under-stimulation. Fearful or poorly socialised animals placed with energetic or unpredictable children may escalate stress responses, leading to avoidance, aggression, or relinquishment. Conversely, congruence supports welfare for both parties: the animal's behavioural needs are more readily met, the young person's expectations are more realistic, and the relationship is less likely to generate chronic stress.

From an animal-welfare perspective, matching is therefore not merely a youth-wellbeing strategy; it is an ethical obligation. Organisations that place rescue animals with adolescents must advocate equally for both members of the dyad. Failure to match elevates risk of return to shelter, behavioural deterioration, and compromised quality of life for the animal.

Adoption Success Research

Empirical studies of pet adoption repeatedly identify compatibility, realistic expectations, lifestyle fit, and behavioural characteristics as key predictors of retention and satisfaction. Personality or behavioural matching between owner and dog has been linked to higher satisfaction and lower risk of dysfunctional ownership (Curb et al., 2013; Zeigler-Hill & Highfill, 2010; see systematic review by Bauer et al., 2023). Consideration of the animal's personality and behaviour prior to adoption improves eventual owner satisfaction (Bouma et al., 2022). Matching programmes that limit choice to animals deemed a good fit, conduct pre-view matching conversations, and emphasise behavioural compatibility are associated with better live-release and lower return rates (Reese, 2021).

Although pure personality matching alone is not always sufficient (Anderson et al., 2022), the broader literature consistently shows that adoptions succeed more often when expectations, lifestyle, and behavioural profiles align and when post-adoption support is available. Appearance-driven or impulse decisions, by contrast, elevate risk of later disappointment and relinquishment.

Foster Care Matching

Parallel evidence comes from human foster-care research. Thoughtful matching of children with foster families improves placement stability, attachment quality, behavioural outcomes, and satisfaction, and reduces disruption (Redding et al., 2000; Winokur et al., 2018). Factors such as temperament congruence, parental expectations, preparation, and ongoing support

all contribute. Racial matching has also been associated with modest gains in stability in some large-scale analyses (LaBrenz et al., 2022). The underlying principle is identical: relationships and placements flourish when they are intentionally matched rather than randomly assigned.

Supported Decision-Making and Person-Centred Practice

Modern matching processes that involve the young person in the decision reflect principles of person-centred care, strengths-based practice, and supported decision-making. When individuals participate in choosing the animal, they develop greater psychological ownership and commitment to the relationship. Self-determination theory and related frameworks predict that autonomous choice enhances motivation and persistence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the animal-placement context, this means the young person is more likely to invest effort in training, care routines, and relationship maintenance when they have helped select a compatible companion rather than having one assigned.

Shared Activities and Relationship Strengthening

Relationships are strengthened through repeated positive interactions. Shared activities that both parties enjoy—walking, play, quiet companionship, grooming—provide the behavioural substrate for attachment and mutual satisfaction. An energetic young person matched with a high-drive dog generates frequent opportunities for outdoor activity and play; a quieter adolescent matched with a calm older cat or low-energy dog generates frequent opportunities for proximity, stroking, and low-arousal co-regulation. Frequency and quality of interaction predict stronger and more secure human–animal bonds (Curl et al., 2016; more recent work confirms associations between interaction frequency and bond strength/security). Matching therefore maximises the density of positive shared experiences that sustain the relationship over time.

Synthesis and Implications

The seven lines of evidence converge on a single practical conclusion. Positive outcomes for both the young person and the companion animal are more probable when:

- the young person’s temperament, activity preferences, and lifestyle are congruent with the animal’s behavioural profile;
- expectations are realistic and informed by accurate assessment of both parties;
- the broader support environment (housing, family capacity, professional guidance) supplies the necessary resources and scaffolding; and
- the young person participates meaningfully in the matching decision.

Mismatch elevates risk of stress, behavioural problems, relationship breakdown, and compromised welfare for both members of the dyad. Matching is therefore simultaneously a youth-wellbeing intervention and an animal-welfare imperative.

For organisations that place rescue animals with adolescents, the implication is clear: invest in systematic, multi-source assessment of both the young person and the animal, facilitate supported choice, provide preparation and ongoing support, and prioritise compatibility over speed of placement. The theoretical and empirical literature across psychology, animal behaviour, adoption research, and child welfare all point in the same direction.

Conclusion

Careful matching of young person, companion animal, and support environment is not an optional refinement; it is the application of well-established principles of person–environment fit and goodness of fit to the human–animal relationship. When these principles are observed, the likelihood of a safe, enduring, and mutually beneficial relationship rises. When they are ignored, both parties are placed at unnecessary risk. The evidence from multiple independent fields is consistent and compelling.

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