



Paws & Connect



TRUST. CONNECTION. GROWTH.

Executive Summary

Paws & Connect is a proposed community-based initiative that seeks to create safe, supported and meaningful connections between young people and companion animals, while simultaneously supporting the welfare and successful placement of rescue animals.

The initiative is founded on a simple premise: safe and meaningful relationships can create opportunities for trust, belonging, responsibility, confidence and healthy growth. For some young people, particularly those experiencing adversity, disconnection or difficulty establishing positive relationships, connection with a companion animal may provide a unique and accessible opportunity to experience these qualities in everyday life.

At the same time, animal rescue organisations across Australia continue to face significant challenges, including increasing demand, limited resources and shortages of suitable foster and adoptive homes. Paws & Connect seeks to explore whether these two areas of need can be brought together thoughtfully and responsibly, creating a model in which the wellbeing of both the young person and the animal remains central.

Paws & Connect does not view companion animals as therapeutic tools, behavioural interventions or a solution to complex social or mental health difficulties. Animals are partners, not tools. The proposed approach instead recognises the potential value of the human–animal relationship itself and seeks to create the conditions in which a healthy relationship can develop.

Central to the model is the principle that successful relationships should not be based on convenience or availability alone. Paws & Connect proposes a structured Relationship Matching Framework designed to consider the needs, circumstances, capabilities and preferences of both the young person and the individual animal. Matching would occur in collaboration with families or carers, animal rescue organisations and, where appropriate, relevant professionals. The aim is not to find simply *an* animal for a young person, but to identify a relationship in which both parties have a reasonable opportunity to thrive.

The proposed model incorporates two interconnected pathways. The first supports the young person by providing opportunities to develop responsibility, confidence, connection, empathy, belonging and a sense of contribution through an appropriately supported relationship. The second recognises that the animal is an individual with its own needs, history, temperament and capacity for connection. Animal welfare therefore remains an equally important consideration throughout assessment, matching, placement and ongoing review.

Importantly, the young person is not only a recipient of connection. Through the opportunity to become a trusted caregiver—meeting an animal’s everyday needs with consistency and sensitivity—they experience purpose, competence, responsibility and the profound sense of being needed. This act of providing care is itself a powerful source of growth: it strengthens self-belief, empathy and emotional regulation while the reciprocal bond deepens trust and belonging for both.

Paws & Connect is intended to complement, rather than replace, existing family, community, educational, animal rescue and professional support systems. It is not designed to provide clinical treatment or to operate outside appropriate professional boundaries. Where young people have identified clinical, developmental or other significant support needs, collaboration with relevant professionals would remain important.

The proposed framework is informed by evidence across several interconnected areas, including adolescent development, human–animal relationships, social connection, belonging, responsibility, wellbeing, attachment and relationship formation, together with evidence concerning animal welfare, foster care and successful companion-animal placement. This evidence is brought together through a series of propositions that underpin the Paws & Connect model and provide a foundation for ongoing evaluation.

The initiative is also grounded in the recognition that good intentions alone are insufficient when working with young people and animals. Paws & Connect therefore places strong emphasis on safeguarding, ethical practice, animal welfare, appropriate assessment, informed participation, family engagement, professional boundaries, rescue partnerships and ongoing monitoring. The proposed Evaluation Framework will provide a mechanism for assessing whether the model is achieving its intended outcomes, identifying areas for improvement and contributing to a stronger evidence base over time.

Importantly, Paws & Connect is not premised on the assumption that every young person will benefit from living with an animal, nor that every animal is suited to this role. Individual differences matter. The proposed model therefore prioritises choice, suitability, informed decision-making and the wellbeing of both participants.

The long-term vision of Paws & Connect is to develop a sustainable, evidence-informed model that demonstrates how thoughtfully supported human–animal relationships may contribute to positive developmental outcomes for young people while creating meaningful opportunities for rescue animals to enter safe and suitable homes.

Ultimately, Paws & Connect seeks to build more than placements. It seeks to create safe connections that promote trust and a sense of belonging, creating opportunities for resilience and lifelong growth.

The central belief is simple: when the right young person and the right animal are thoughtfully brought together, within the right environment and with the right support, a relationship can become a powerful context for connection, responsibility, confidence and growth—for both.

This document describes the proposed philosophy, practice model, Theory of Change, evaluation approach and governance commitments of Paws & Connect. Evidence cited throughout provides the rationale for the model; it should not be read as evidence that Paws & Connect itself has already demonstrated these outcomes. The organisation is committed to testing, learning and refining the model through evaluation and independent research.

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Section One: The Paws & Connect Philosophy

1.1. The Heart of Paws & Connect

We believe that safe, caring relationships have the power to change lives.

We believe that when young people experience trust, responsibility and unconditional acceptance through relationships with companion animals and supportive adults, they can build confidence, resilience, empathy and hope for the future. We believe that trust is the foundation upon which hope, belonging and lifelong growth are built.

We believe that growth is reciprocal. Young people do not only receive care and connection; they are also given the opportunity to provide it. In becoming a trusted caregiver for a vulnerable animal—meeting needs, offering consistency and responding with sensitivity—they experience themselves as capable, valued and needed. This act of providing care is a profound source of purpose, competence and self-belief.

We also believe that rescued animals deserve lives filled with safety, love and belonging.

By supporting both, we create opportunities for growth that benefit individuals, families and communities.

1.2. Our Story

Paws & Connect began with a quiet moment on a lounge-room floor.

For eight consecutive evenings, our founder lay on the floor, patiently waiting for a frightened rescue kitten to venture out from beneath the couch. There was never any expectation that the kitten would come. Trust can't be rushed, and it can't be demanded. The only things on offer were patience, consistency, and a safe place to return to.

On the eighth night the kitten finally, cautiously, emerged. Ever so slowly it approached, took a small bite of a treat from a steady hand, and began to purr.

That moment was powerful and profound.

Here was a frightened, vulnerable little animal — entirely dependent on others for safety, care and love — choosing, in its own time, to make a connection. Nothing was forced, rushed or expected. The kitten had simply been given the time, patience and safety it needed to feel secure enough to take that first step.

For our founder, the experience was deeply moving. To witness another living being decide to trust you, however cautiously, is an incredibly powerful thing. That small moment became a lasting reminder: trust cannot be demanded or hurried. It must be built through safety, patience, consistency and care.

If a safe, trusting relationship could help change the life of a frightened rescue animal, what might carefully supported relationships with companion animals mean for young people who have experienced adversity, isolation or disconnection?

Paws & Connect was created to build those relationships. We believe they can foster trust, belonging, confidence and hope.

We don't believe healing comes from simply owning a pet. We believe it grows through carefully supported relationships built on patience, trust, consistency and mutual care — relationships in which young people both receive connection and learn the deep value of providing it.

That belief became the foundation of Paws & Connect.

Every young person deserves the chance to experience trust.

Every rescue animal deserves the chance to belong.

Sometimes those journeys begin together.

1.3. The Need

Many young people experience increasing social disconnection, psychological distress and reduced belonging. At the same time, thousands of companion animals wait in rescue organisations for safe, loving homes.

These two challenges are usually addressed separately.

Paws & Connect believes that, when carefully supported, meaningful relationships between young people and rescued companion animals can benefit both.

Young people thrive through safe, trusting relationships and a sense of belonging, with relationships being among the strongest protective factors in human well-being.

Yet many experience increased social disconnection, psychological distress and reduced opportunities for meaningful connection during adolescence.

Paws & Connect creates safe relationships where both children and companion animals discover that they are worthy of trust, belonging and hope—and where the young person also discovers the strength that comes from being a reliable caregiver.

Research suggests that companion animals can contribute to protective factors associated with positive wellbeing, including social support, routine, belonging, physical activity and emotional connection. Equally important is the developmental value of the caregiving role itself: the everyday acts of feeding, walking, soothing and responding to an animal's needs offer concrete opportunities to practise empathy, emotional regulation, responsibility and a growing sense of competence.

1.4. Our Beliefs

We believe that trust is the foundation of every meaningful relationship.

We believe that every young person deserves to feel safe, valued and that they belong.

We believe that rescued companion animals deserve the opportunity to experience security, love and a permanent home.

We believe that carefully supported relationships between young people and companion animals can foster trust, belonging, responsibility, hope and resilience.

We believe that providing care is as transformative as receiving it. When a young person is trusted with the wellbeing of a vulnerable animal and meets that responsibility, they experience themselves as capable, needed and agentic—an experience that fuels lasting self-belief.

We believe that our methods should always reflect our values, and that compassion and professionalism go hand in hand.

We believe that lasting change is created through evidence-informed practice, continual learning and genuine partnership with families, rescue organisations and communities.

1.5. Our Vision

A world where every child and every companion animal has the opportunity to thrive through safe, trusting relationships.

1.6. Our Mission

Creating safe connections where trust grows, belonging flourishes, and brighter futures begin.

1.7. Our Core Values

Trust

We build trust through consistency, honesty and respect.

Connection

We seek relationships that benefit both young people and companion animals.

Safety

Emotional and physical safety guide every decision.

Belonging

Every young person and every animal deserves to feel accepted.

Growth

We believe relationships create opportunities for lifelong growth—through both the care that is received and the care that is given.

1.8. Our Guiding Principles

Every relationship matters

Healing and growth begin with genuine, trusting relationships. Whether between a young person, an animal, a family or a volunteer, connection has the power to create lasting change.

Safety comes first

Emotional, physical and psychological safety are essential for both young people and animals. Nothing is more important than creating environments where everyone feels secure, respected and protected.

Animals are partners, not tools

Animals are never viewed as interventions or equipment. They are sentient beings with their own needs, personalities and welfare. Their wellbeing is equal to the wellbeing of the young people we support.

Trust is earned

Trust develops through consistency, patience, honesty and compassion. We recognise that trust cannot be rushed and that meaningful relationships take time.

Every young person has strengths

We focus on potential rather than problems. Every young person possesses strengths, resilience and the capacity for growth when given the right support and opportunities.

Providing care builds capability

Growth occurs not only when young people receive care and connection, but when they provide it. Everyday responsibilities of animal care—feeding, walking, grooming, comforting—offer mastery experiences that strengthen self-efficacy, emotional regulation, empathy, purpose and a sense of being needed.

Individual journeys are respected

There is no single pathway to wellbeing. Every young person, family and animal is unique, and support should be flexible, personalised and responsive.

Growth happens together

Young people, animals, volunteers, families and communities all learn from one another. Growth is mutual, not one-sided.

Compassion guides every decision

Kindness, empathy and respect shape how we communicate, make decisions and respond to challenges.

Evidence informs practice

Our work is guided by research, lived experience and continuous learning. We remain curious, evaluate what we do and strive to improve.

Collaboration creates stronger outcomes

Meaningful change happens when rescue organisations, families, schools, mental health services and communities work together.

Hope is always possible

No matter where someone begins, positive change is possible through connection, support and opportunity.

1.9. Our Assumptions

Assumption 1

Not every young person will benefit from a relationship with a companion animal. Paws & Connect is intended for young people who demonstrate an interest in, or openness to, developing a relationship with an animal. Participation should always be voluntary.

Assumption 2

Safe relationships can foster positive development. We assume that relationships characterised by safety, consistency, patience and trust can contribute to emotional wellbeing, resilience and a sense of belonging.

Assumption 3

Animals are individuals. Like people, animals have different personalities, histories, needs and preferences. Not every animal will be suitable for every young person.

Assumption 4

Support matters. Positive outcomes are more likely when relationships are thoughtfully matched and supported, rather than left to chance.

Assumption 5

The quality of the relationship matters more than the mere presence of an animal.

Assumption 6

Providing care is developmentally powerful. We assume that the experience of being a trusted and effective caregiver—meeting another living being's needs with consistency and sensitivity—contributes meaningfully to a young person's sense of competence, purpose, responsibility and self-worth.

Section Two: The Paws & Connect Practice Framework

2. Introduction: From principles to practice

2.1. Our Program

Paws & Connect connects carefully selected young people with rescue cats and dogs through a structured, supported relationship-building process. Every placement is individually matched to meet the needs of both the young person and the animal, recognising that successful relationships cannot be rushed or based on random chance.

2.1.1. Pathway One

Supported Foster-to-Adopt

This pathway is designed to promote a mutually safe, caring, supportive environment for both the adolescent and the companion animal in a temporary manner as a foster carer. There is also the option of continuing care through adoption should this be appropriate.

- Assessment
- Relationship matching
- Foster placement
- Ongoing support
- Review
- Option to adopt

The child experiences:
responsibility
routine

The young person may experience:
watching an animal blossom
becoming part of the rescue journey

These experiences may be deeply meaningful and may create opportunities for confidence, agency and a growing sense of competence.

They also learn something very powerful:
"I helped this animal become confident."
That's a huge confidence builder.

This pathway allows both the young person and the animal to build trust before making a lifelong commitment.

2.1.2. Pathway Two

Direct Adoption with Support

- Assessment
- Relationship matching
- Adoption
- Ongoing support
- Follow-up reviews

This is seen as suitable when a rescue animal has already completed foster care and is ready for permanent placement.

2.2. Foster Carer and Family Expectations & Support

2.2.1. What Paws & Connect and the rescue organisation provide

The young person and their family should not be expected to navigate fostering alone. Depending on the arrangement and the individual needs of the young person, support may include:

- Veterinary costs, including approved veterinary treatment as required
- Food and appropriate feeding supplies
- Lead, collar/harness and other essential equipment
- Appropriate toys and enrichment resources
- Pet treats where appropriate
- Access to partnered veterinary practices
- Ongoing guidance and practical support
- Regular check-ins and feedback
- Access to a foster-carer group chat where appropriate, with privacy and safeguarding considerations
- Support from the rescue organisation regarding the animal's history, needs and behaviour
- Guidance if concerns arise about the animal or the fostering arrangement

2.2.2. What the family and young person provide

In return, fostering involves a genuine commitment to the animal's day-to-day wellbeing. The family and young person would be expected to:

- Provide a **safe, stable and loving home environment**
- Ensure appropriate supervision and security, including a secure yard where required
- Provide regular exercise, stimulation and companionship appropriate to the animal
- Participate in agreed routines for feeding, exercise, grooming and general care
- Attend veterinary appointments at partnered or approved veterinary practices when required
- Communicate promptly if concerns arise about the animal's health, behaviour or wellbeing
- Treat the animal with patience, kindness and respect
- Contribute to a written description of the foster animal, including their personality, interests, strengths and the things the young person loves about them
- Participate in agreed check-ins and reviews with Paws & Connect and/or the rescue organisation
- Understand that **animal welfare remains the shared responsibility of the adults supporting the placement**, even where the young person takes an active caregiving role.

2.2.3. The Young Person's Role

The young person is encouraged to take an active and meaningful role in the care of their companion animal, with responsibilities matched to their age, developmental stage, capabilities and circumstances.

This may include:

- Developing and maintaining daily care routines
- Participating in feeding and exercise
- Spending time playing with and enriching the animal
- Learning to recognise and respond appropriately to the animal's needs
- Building trust through consistency, patience and predictable care
- Learning about the animal's individual personality and preferences
- Advocating for the animal by communicating concerns to the adults supporting them

- Writing about their foster animal's personality, strengths and the things they value about them
- Participating in reviews and reflecting on their experience.

The purpose is not to place responsibility for the animal solely on the young person, but to provide an opportunity for meaningful participation, responsibility and connection within a safe and supported environment.

2.3. Paws & Connect Relationship Matching Framework

Creating Safe Connections Through Thoughtful Matching

Purpose

The Paws & Connect Relationship Matching Framework is designed to support the careful matching of rescued companion animals with young people. Rather than focusing solely on pet ownership, the framework recognises that successful matches are built upon compatibility between the young person, their family, the animal, and the environment in which the relationship will develop.

The primary goal is to maximise the likelihood of a safe, trusting and enduring relationship that benefits both the young person and the animal

The Paws & Connect Relationship Matching Framework is informed by the principle of **Goodness of Fit**. Successful relationships are more likely to develop when the needs, temperament, strengths and capacities of both the young person and the companion animal are thoughtfully considered together, alongside the support available from their family and environment.

2.3.1. Family Readiness

A young person cannot build a successful relationship with an animal without a supportive family.

Areas considered include:

- Whole-family commitment
- Parent or caregiver willingness
- Financial capacity
- Stability of housing
- Long-term commitment to animal care
- Understanding of fostering responsibilities

- Emergency care planning

Key Principle

The young person may become the primary caregiver, but the family becomes the primary support system.

2.3.2. Young Person Readiness

Rather than asking *"Is this young person suitable?"*, Paws & Connect asks:

"What support will help this young person succeed?"

Areas explored may include:

- Interest in animals
- Previous experiences with pets
- Current circumstances and support needs
- Confidence levels
- Patience
- Ability to follow routines
- School and extracurricular commitments
- Developmental stage
- Communication style
- Expectations about owning a pet

This is not a psychological assessment.

It is a strengths-based conversation designed to understand what type of relationship is most likely to flourish.

2.3.3. Animal Readiness

Each rescue animal is an individual.

Working alongside partner rescue organisations, consideration is given to:

- Temperament
- Sociability
- Confidence
- Activity level
- Age
- Health status

- Previous history
- Behavioural assessment
- Comfort around children and adolescents
- Training level
- Ability to cope with change

The framework recognises that the "best" animal is not necessarily the calmest—it is the one whose needs and temperament complement the young person's.

2.3.4. Relationship Compatibility

This is where the matching process becomes unique.

Rather than simply matching characteristics, the framework considers whether the young person and animal are likely to bring out the best in each other.

Examples include:

Young Person	Animal Match
Quiet and anxious	Calm, affectionate cat or gentle older dog
Energetic	Playful, active dog
Needs confidence	Friendly, socially confident animal
Highly responsible	Younger animal needing routine and training
Prefers calm environments	Older settled rescue

These are examples rather than fixed rules.

Every match is individual.

2.3.5. Lifestyle Compatibility

Practical considerations remain essential.

These include:

- Household routine
- Time available
- Work and school schedules
- Exercise opportunities
- Yard or apartment living
- Existing pets
- Other family members
- Travel commitments

A successful relationship depends upon the family's capacity to meet the animal's needs.

2.3.6. Health and Safety

The welfare of both the young person and the animal is paramount.

Considerations include:

For the animal:

- Vaccinated
- Microchipped
- Desexed
- Veterinary health check
- Behavioural screening

For the young person:

- Allergies
- Physical capability
- Safe handling skills
- Understanding of animal behaviour
- Adult supervision where appropriate

2.3.7. Home Environment

Paws & Connect, together with partner rescue organisations, will respectfully assess whether the home environment is suitable for fostering.

Areas considered include:

- Safe indoor and outdoor spaces
- Secure fencing (where relevant)
- Sleeping areas
- Access to food and water
- Ability to separate animals if required
- Household noise and activity
- Existing pets
- Family dynamics

The aim is not to judge families, but to maximise the likelihood of a successful placement.

2.3.8. Meeting Before Matching

A successful relationship begins before placement.

Whenever possible, young people and families will have opportunities to:

- Meet potential animals
- Observe behaviour
- Spend supervised time together
- Ask questions
- Reflect on the experience

Sometimes the right match is obvious.

Sometimes another animal proves to be a better fit.

Taking time is viewed as a strength rather than a delay.

2.3.9. Ongoing Support

Matching is the beginning, not the end.

Paws & Connect will provide ongoing support throughout the fostering period through:

- Regular check-ins
- Guidance from rescue partners
- Behavioural advice
- Problem-solving assistance
- Emotional support for the young person
- Review of the relationship if difficulties arise

The objective is to help relationships grow rather than expecting them to be perfect from day one.

2.3.10. Guiding Principles

The Relationship Matching Framework is guided by several core principles:

- Every young person is unique.
- Every animal is unique.
- Relationships cannot be forced.
- Good matches are thoughtful rather than rushed.
- Animal welfare and youth wellbeing are equally important.
- Families are partners in the process.

- Success is measured by the quality of the relationship, not simply the placement.

From What to How

The Relationship Matching Framework identifies the factors that contribute to a thoughtful and appropriate match. These considerations provide the “what” of the framework.

The matching process translates these considerations into practice. It describes how Paws & Connect brings together information from the young person, family, rescue organisation and, where appropriate, relevant professionals to make, support and review a potential match.

The two elements are deliberately connected. The process does not replace the framework; it puts it into action.

2.4. The Matching Process

2.4.1. Initial conversation and referral

The process begins with a conversation with the young person and family/carer.

The purpose isn't to determine whether the young person is “*suitable*.” It is to understand:

- Why they are interested in having an animal
- What they hope the relationship might look like
- Their previous experience with animals
- Their daily routines and commitments
- What support is available at home
- What responsibilities they are prepared to take on
- Any practical considerations that may affect the relationship

At this stage, Paws & Connect is asking:

“What conditions would help this relationship succeed?”

2.4.2. Family and environment assessment

This is to establish whether the family can realistically provide: Safety + stability + resources + adult support + long-term commitment. The aim is not to judge families, but to maximise the likelihood of a successful placement.

2.4.3. Animal profile from the rescue partner

Paws & Connect does not determine whether an animal is suitable.

The rescue partner contributes an animal profile, drawing on its existing knowledge and assessments.

For example:

Animal profile

- History
- Age
- Health
- Temperament
- Social behaviour
- Energy/activity requirements
- Known triggers or sensitivities
- Experience with young people
- Behaviour around other animals
- Training
- Environmental needs
- What type of home is likely to suit the animal
- What type of relationship the animal appears to enjoy

And crucially:

What does this animal need from its human companion?

2.4.4. Compatibility discussion

Paws & Connect doesn't simply collect two assessments and tick boxes. We bring the information together to focus on what each important individual needs and how we can best support this.

For example:

Young person

Needs: calm environment, predictable routine, gradual development of confidence.

Animal

Needs: calm home, predictable routine, patient handling, moderate activity.

Environment

Provides: stable household, available caregiver, quiet space, appropriate resources.

Potential relationship

Promising fit — subject to meeting and observation.

2.4.5. Meet, observe and reflect

The young person and animal meet in an appropriately supervised setting.

Paws & Connect and/or the rescue partner can observe things such as:

- Does the young person appear comfortable?
- Does the animal approach voluntarily?
- Does the young person respect the animal's boundaries?
- Does communication appear natural?
- Is there curiosity or interest?
- Does either appear overwhelmed?
- Does the young person understand the animal's signals?
- Does the animal seek interaction?
- Does the interaction feel relaxed rather than forced?

Most importantly:

The young person's reaction and the animal's reaction both matter.

If the young person loves the animal but the animal is clearly uncomfortable, that's not a successful match.

If the animal is friendly but the young person feels intimidated, that's not a successful match either.

This is where “relationships cannot be forced” becomes operational rather than merely philosophical.

2.4.6. Supported placement and review

The match isn't considered "successful" because the animal goes home.

Instead:

Match → placement → support → observation → review → adjustment if necessary.

It is important to establish predetermined review points rather than simply saying

This may include:

Early check-in

How is everyone settling?

Initial review

Is the routine working? Is the young person coping with responsibilities? Is the animal settling?

Ongoing review

Is the relationship developing as anticipated?

Problem-solving

Are difficulties emerging that can be addressed through additional support?

Rematching / alternative placement

If the relationship isn't working despite reasonable support, the welfare of both remains paramount.

A failed match should not be presented as a failure of the young person. Sometimes two individuals simply aren't right for one another. Thoughtful matching includes recognising when a relationship isn't the right fit.

The Paws & Connect Matching Process



Creating safe, enduring and mutually beneficial relationships



A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS



Paws & Connect

Coordinates the process, facilitates conversations and considers compatibility.



Young Person & Family/Carer

Share lived knowledge of needs, routines, supports and aspirations.



Rescue Partner

Provides animal information, history, temperament and care requirements.



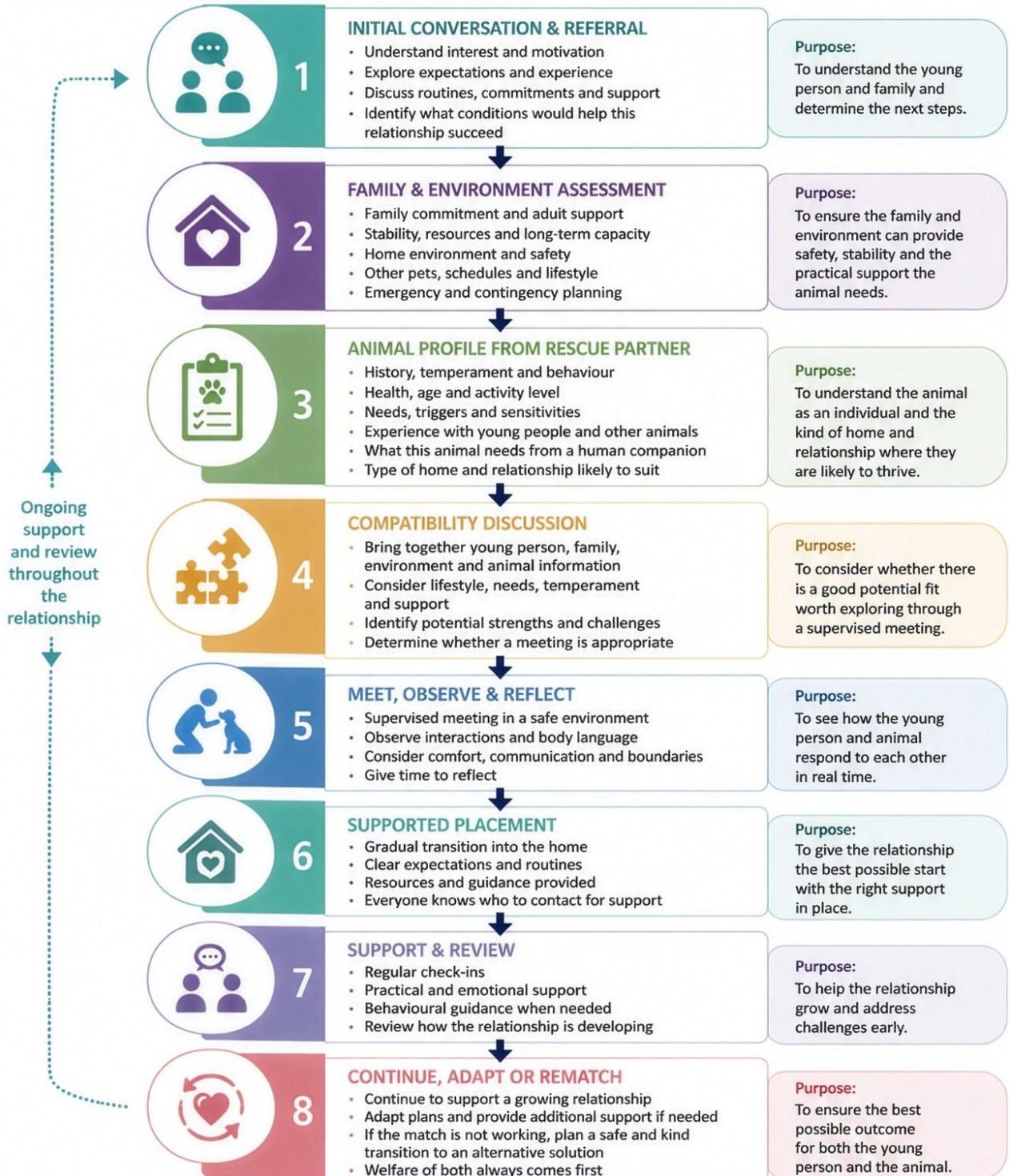
Relevant Professionals

Contribute expertise where needed and with appropriate consent.



Together

Make an informed matching decision centred on the wellbeing of both.



GUIDING PRINCIPLE

Good matches take time, compassion and collaboration.
Every relationship is unique.



2.5. Evidence Base and Theoretical Foundations

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 may increase the risk of stress, behavioural difficulties, relationship breakdown and compromised welfare for both members of the dyad. Thoughtful matching is therefore both a youth-wellbeing consideration 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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Section Three: The Paws & Connect Theory of Change



Paws & Connect

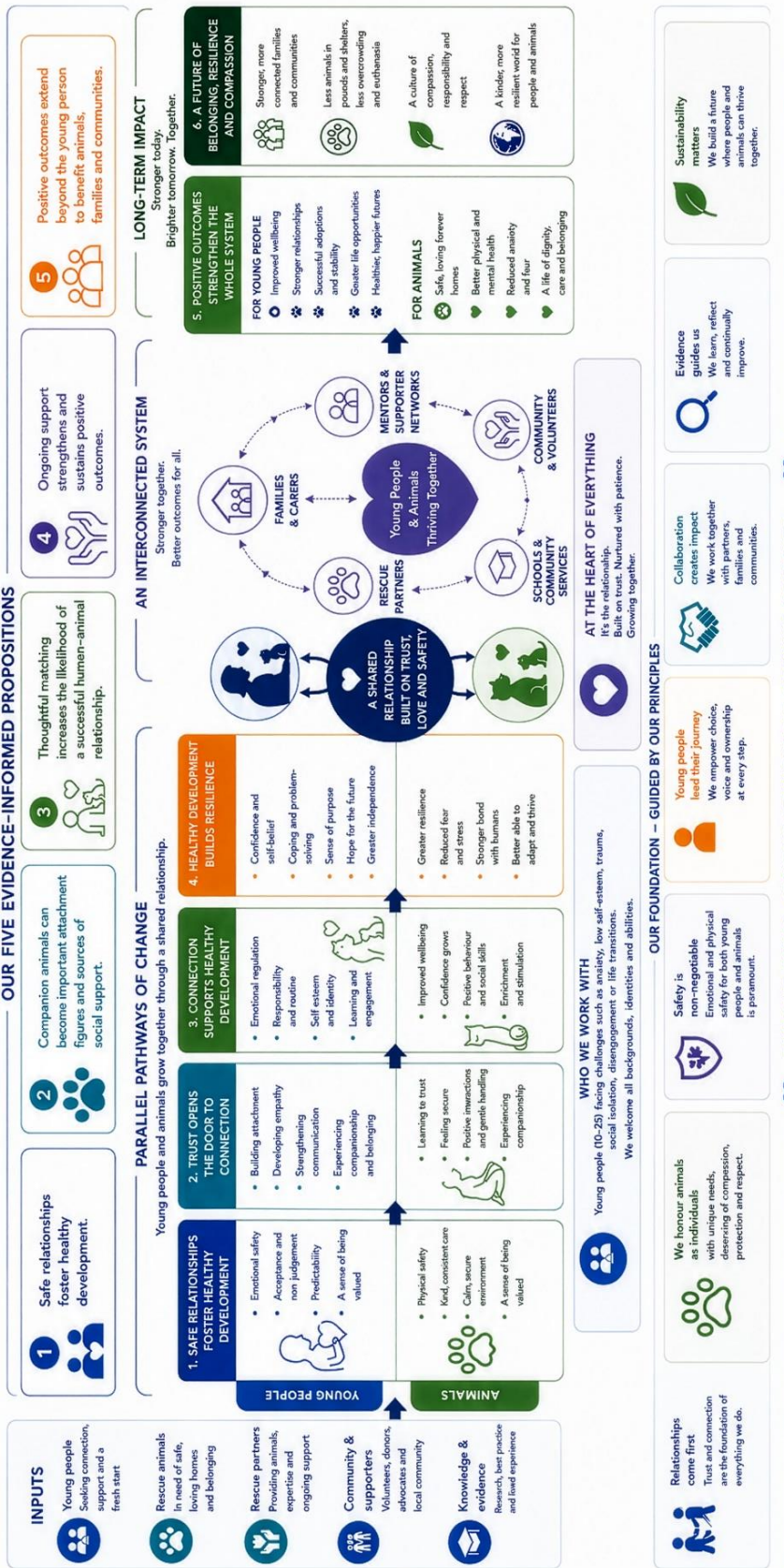
TRUST. CONNECTION. GROWTH.

THEORY OF CHANGE

A Systems Model of Connection, Growth and Belonging
Safe, trusting relationships are the foundation of healthy development. When young people and animals experience safety, trust and connection, positive change ripples outward—strengthening individuals, families, animals, organisations and communities.

OUR BELIEF

Safe, trusting relationships are the foundation of healing, growth and lifelong wellbeing for young people and animals.



3.2. Explaining Connections and Pathways

Introduction

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.**

This belief is supported by decades of research across developmental psychology, attachment theory, resilience science, neuroscience and social ecology. While every young person's journey is unique, the evidence consistently shows that when children experience relationships characterised by safety, consistency, trust and acceptance, positive developmental change becomes far more likely.

Paws & Connect seeks to create these conditions by carefully matching young people with rescued companion animals and supporting the relationships that develop around them.

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

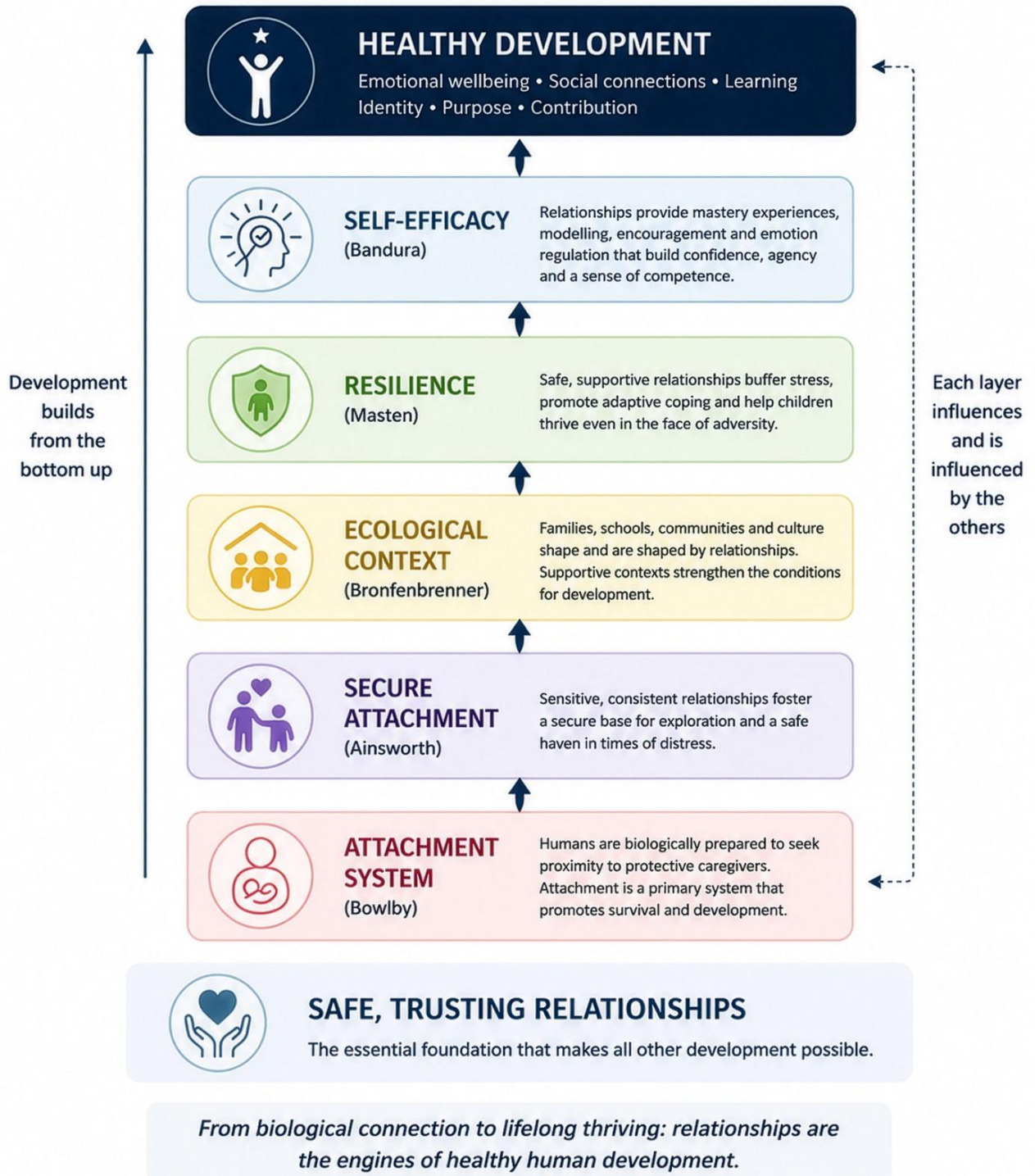
The ultimate aim of Paws & Connect is not simply successful pet placements or short-term improvements in wellbeing.

Its long-term vision 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.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS *of Healthy Development*

Safe, trusting relationships are the foundation.



3.3. Theoretical and empirical evidence supporting Paws & Connect Theory of Change propositions

Evidence status and interpretation

The literature reviewed in this section draws from several related fields, including developmental psychology, attachment, resilience, human–animal interaction, animal welfare and placement research. Much of this evidence supports the theoretical rationale for Paws & Connect rather than directly testing this specific model. Accordingly, the propositions below are treated as evidence-informed hypotheses and pathways to be evaluated, not as established causal effects of Paws & Connect. Where evidence is associative, context-specific or drawn from a different intervention model, this distinction is retained.

3.3.1. Proposition 1: Safe, trusting relationships are fundamental to healthy development

Safe, Trusting Relationships as the Foundation of Healthy Development: A integrated theoretical framework

Drawing on Attachment Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, Resilience Science, and Self-Efficacy Theory

1. Introduction

A substantial body of developmental science converges on a central claim: safe, trusting relationships are not merely beneficial but fundamental to healthy human development across the lifespan. From the earliest moments of life, the quality of an infant’s relationships with caregivers shapes the architecture of the developing brain, the capacity for emotional regulation, the formation of a coherent sense of self, and the ability to form and sustain relationships later in life (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This document synthesises key theoretical frameworks that illuminate why and how these relationships matter, focusing on John Bowlby’s attachment theory, Mary Ainsworth’s empirical elaboration of secure attachment, Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, Ann Masten’s resilience science, and Albert Bandura’s self-efficacy theory, together with complementary contributions from Erik Erikson and contemporary developmental neuroscience.

The argument is not that relationships are the sole determinant of developmental outcomes, nor that biology is irrelevant. Rather, relationships constitute

the primary proximal process through which genetic predispositions, environmental opportunities and adversities, and cultural contexts are translated into developmental trajectories. In Bronfenbrenner's terms, relationships are the "engines" of development; in the language of the Center on the Developing Child, they are the "active ingredients" of the environment's influence on the developing child (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

No single theory fully explains the complexity of human development. Rather, each contributes a unique perspective on how safe, trusting relationships influence developmental processes. Together these theories provide a coherent conceptual foundation for the Paws & Connect Theory of Change.

2. John Bowlby and Attachment Theory

John Bowlby's attachment theory provides the foundational account of why human infants are biologically prepared to form enduring emotional bonds with caregivers. Drawing on ethology, evolutionary biology, and clinical observation, Bowlby (1969/1982, 1973, 1980) argued that the attachment behavioural system evolved because proximity to a protective caregiver increased the survival chances of vulnerable offspring. Attachment is therefore not a secondary drive derived from feeding or secondary reinforcement, but a primary motivational system in its own right.

Central to Bowlby's formulation is the dual function of the attachment figure as a *safe haven* in times of threat or distress and as a *secure base* from which the child can explore the environment (Bowlby, 1988). When caregivers are consistently available, responsive, and sensitive, the child develops confidence that support will be forthcoming when needed. This confidence frees cognitive and emotional resources for exploration, learning, and the progressive development of autonomy. Conversely, when care is unavailable, rejecting, or unpredictable, the child's attachment system remains chronically activated or becomes defensively deactivated, with consequences for emotion regulation, attention, and later relationships.

Bowlby further proposed that early interactions give rise to *internal working models*—cognitive-affective representations of the self, others, and relationships—that guide expectations and behaviour in subsequent relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). These models are not fixed, but they tend toward continuity because they shape the interpretation of new social information and the selection of relational partners and strategies. The clinical implication is profound: the quality of early caregiving relationships lays down templates that influence mental health and interpersonal functioning across the life course.

3. Mary Ainsworth and the Secure Attachment Pattern

Mary Ainsworth translated Bowlby's theoretical insights into a rigorous observational science. Through naturalistic studies in Uganda and Baltimore, and the subsequent development of the Strange Situation Procedure, Ainsworth and colleagues identified individual differences in the organisation of infant–caregiver attachment (Ainsworth, 1967; Ainsworth et al., 1978). The majority of infants in low-risk samples organise their attachment behaviour in a *secure* pattern: they use the caregiver as a secure base for exploration, seek contact or proximity when distressed, and are readily comforted by the caregiver's return. Secure attachment is strongly associated with caregiver sensitivity—the ability to notice, accurately interpret, and respond promptly and appropriately to the infant's signals (Ainsworth et al., 1978; De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997).

Insecure patterns (avoidant and resistant/ambivalent) and, later, the disorganised pattern identified by Main and Solomon (1990), reflect adaptations to less optimal caregiving. Avoidant infants minimise the display of attachment behaviour in the face of rejection; resistant infants maximise it in the face of inconsistency; disorganised infants show contradictory or fearful behaviour, often in the context of frightened or frightening caregiving. Longitudinal research has demonstrated that secure attachment in infancy predicts more favourable outcomes in socioemotional competence, emotion regulation, peer relationships, and reduced risk for psychopathology, although these associations are probabilistic and moderated by subsequent experience (Sroufe et al., 2005; Thompson, 2016).

Ainsworth's contribution underscores a critical point: it is not the mere presence of a caregiver but the *quality* of the relationship—characterised by sensitivity, consistency, and emotional availability—that fosters the sense of safety and trust necessary for healthy development. Secure attachment is, in essence, the behavioural and representational expression of a trusting relationship.

4. Urie Bronfenbrenner and Ecological Systems Theory

While attachment theory focuses on the dyadic relationship, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory situates that relationship within a nested set of environmental systems that jointly shape development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The *microsystem* comprises the immediate settings in which the child participates—home, childcare, school—and the face-to-face interactions that occur within them. The *mesosystem* refers to the interconnections among microsystems (e.g., parent–teacher communication). The *exosystem* includes settings that affect the child indirectly (e.g., parental workplace), and the *macrosystem* encompasses cultural values, laws, and social policies. The *chronosystem* adds the dimension of time—both individual developmental time and historical time.

Bronfenbrenner's later bioecological model emphasises *proximal processes*—progressively more complex reciprocal interactions between the developing person and the persons, objects, and symbols in the immediate environment—as the primary engines of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Stable, responsive relationships are paradigmatic proximal processes. A caregiver who engages in contingent “serve-and-return” interactions, scaffolds the child's exploration, and provides emotional co-regulation is enacting precisely the kind of process that builds brain architecture and developmental competence (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Critically, the effectiveness of proximal processes depends on the broader ecological context: economic stress, social isolation, or community violence can undermine a caregiver's capacity to sustain sensitive interactions, while supportive policies, extended family networks, and high-quality early childhood programmes can strengthen it.

Bronfenbrenner's framework therefore expands the lens beyond the caregiver–child dyad without diminishing its importance. Safe, trusting relationships remain fundamental, but they are themselves nested within and contingent upon larger systems of support and constraint. Interventions that aim only at the individual or dyadic level while ignoring the ecological surround are likely to have limited and transient effects.

5. Ann Masten and Resilience Science

Resilience science, to which Ann Masten has been a central contributor, addresses the question of how some individuals achieve positive adaptation despite significant adversity (Masten, 2001, 2014; Masten et al., 1990). Resilience is defined as the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten its function, viability, or development (Masten, 2011). One of the most robust and replicated findings in this literature is that the single most common protective factor for children who thrive in the face of hardship is the presence of at least one stable, committed, and supportive relationship with a caring adult (Masten, 2001; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015).

Masten has characterised resilience as “ordinary magic”—not the product of rare and extraordinary qualities, but the operation of basic human adaptive systems when they are given a chance to work (Masten, 2001). Secure attachment relationships, responsive caregiving, and the sense of belonging and safety they provide are among the most powerful of these adaptive systems. They buffer the child from the physiological and psychological effects of toxic stress, support the development of self-regulation and problem-solving skills, and provide models of effective coping. In the absence of such relationships, even children with considerable individual strengths are at elevated risk; with them, many children exposed to serious adversity demonstrate remarkable recovery and competence.

Resilience research thus reinforces and extends the attachment and ecological perspectives. Relationships are not only formative in typical development; they are the primary mechanism through which protective processes operate under conditions of risk. Building and sustaining safe, trusting relationships is therefore a core strategy for promoting resilience at individual, family, and community levels (Masten, 2018).

6. Albert Bandura and Self-Efficacy

Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory and the construct of self-efficacy provide a complementary account of how relationships contribute to agency and competence (Bandura, 1977, 1982, 1997). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's beliefs about their capacity to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments. These beliefs influence the goals people set, the effort they expend, their persistence in the face of obstacles, and their emotional reactions to challenge.

Bandura identified four principal sources of self-efficacy information: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences (observing similar others succeed), verbal persuasion, and physiological and affective states. Safe, trusting relationships are implicated in all four. Responsive caregivers structure opportunities for age-appropriate mastery, provide models of competent behaviour, offer encouragement and realistic feedback, and help regulate the child's arousal so that challenges are experienced as manageable rather than overwhelming. In attachment terms, the secure base enables the exploration and problem-solving that generate mastery experiences; the safe haven helps the child recover from setbacks without catastrophic loss of confidence.

Over time, the internal working models formed in early relationships interact with self-efficacy beliefs. A child who has experienced consistent support is more likely to approach novel situations with the expectation of eventual success and of help if needed. Conversely, chronic relational insecurity can undermine self-efficacy, contributing to avoidance, helplessness, or defensive grandiosity. Bandura's framework thus links the relational foundations of development to the agentic processes that sustain learning, achievement, and mental health throughout life.

7. Complementary Perspectives

7.1 Erikson's Basic Trust

Erik Erikson's psychosocial stage theory places the crisis of *basic trust versus basic mistrust* at the centre of infancy (Erikson, 1950/1963). The infant who experiences consistent, responsive care develops a fundamental sense that the world is reliable and that the self is worthy of care. This "basic trust" is the developmental precursor of hope and the foundation upon which subsequent psychosocial tasks—autonomy, initiative, industry, identity—are built. Erikson's formulation is closely aligned with attachment

theory; indeed, Bowlby and Ainsworth can be read as providing the ethological and empirical grounding for the relational processes Erikson described.

7.2 Contemporary Developmental Neuroscience and Relational Health

Modern developmental science has illuminated the biological mechanisms through which relationships shape development. Contingent, reciprocal interactions (“serve and return”) between caregiver and child stimulate neural circuit formation, support the development of executive function and stress-regulation systems, and protect against the disruptive effects of toxic stress (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, 2015; Shonkoff, 2016). The concept of *early relational health*—the capacity to form and maintain safe, stable, and nurturing relationships—has emerged as a unifying framework that integrates attachment, resilience, and neuroscience perspectives (Garner & Yogman, 2021). Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships (SSNRs) are now recognised in public health frameworks (e.g., CDC’s Essentials for Childhood) as a primary prevention target for child maltreatment and a foundation for lifelong health.

8. Synthesis: Why Safe, Trusting Relationships Are Fundamental

Across these theoretical traditions, a coherent picture emerges. Human infants are biologically prepared to seek and maintain proximity to protective caregivers (Bowlby). The quality of those early relationships—particularly caregiver sensitivity—organises individual differences in attachment security that shape internal working models and developmental trajectories (Ainsworth). These relationships operate as the core proximal processes within nested ecological systems that either support or constrain their effectiveness (Bronfenbrenner). Under conditions of adversity, the presence of at least one stable, supportive relationship is the most consistent predictor of resilience (Masten). Through the provision of mastery opportunities, modelling, encouragement, and co-regulation, such relationships build the self-efficacy beliefs that sustain agency and competence (Bandura). And at the biological level, they literally shape the developing brain and stress-response systems that underwrite lifelong health and learning.

The practical implication is clear. Efforts to promote healthy development—whether in families, early childhood programmes, schools, or community systems—must prioritise the creation and protection of safe, trusting relationships. This requires attention not only to the skills of individual caregivers but to the ecological conditions that enable or impede sensitive, consistent care. Policies that reduce family stress, expand access to high-quality early care and education, support parental mental health, and strengthen community networks are, on this view, developmental interventions of the first order.

9. Conclusion

The theory that safe, trusting relationships are fundamental to healthy development rests on a broad and deep empirical and theoretical foundation. From Bowlby's evolutionary account of the attachment system, through Ainsworth's demonstration of the power of sensitive care, Bronfenbrenner's ecological embedding of proximal processes, Masten's identification of relationships as the cornerstone of resilience, and Bandura's linkage of relational support to self-efficacy, the evidence converges. Relationships are the medium through which human development unfolds. Ensuring that every child has access to at least one—and preferably many—safe, stable, and nurturing relationships is among the most important investments a society can make in its future.

These theoretical foundations provide the conceptual basis upon which the Paws & Connect Theory of Change is built. The following propositions translate these broad developmental principles into the specific mechanisms through which meaningful relationships—including relationships with companion animals—may contribute to positive developmental outcomes.

Theoretical Summaries

Theory	Principal theorist(s)	Contribution
Attachment Theory	John Bowlby & Mary Ainsworth	Secure relationships provide a foundation for healthy development.
Ecological Systems Theory	Urie Bronfenbrenner	Development occurs within interconnected family, school and community systems.
Resilience Science	Ann Masten	Protective relationships foster resilience following adversity.
Self-Efficacy Theory	Albert Bandura	Supportive relationships build confidence and belief in one's capabilities.
Psychosocial Development	Erik Erikson	Trust is the foundation of healthy psychosocial development.
Developmental Neuroscience	(Multiple researchers)	Safe relationships shape brain development and stress regulation.
Need to Belong Theory	Roy Baumeister & Mark Leary	Belonging is a fundamental human motivation.
Self-Determination Theory	Richard Ryan & Edward Deci	Relatedness is one of three basic psychological needs.

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3.3.2. Proposition 2: Companion Animals Can Become Attachment Figures and Sources of Social Support.

This evidence review examines the theoretical and empirical literature supporting the proposition that companion animals can fulfil important attachment and social support functions, particularly for adolescents, thereby creating pathways toward broader social connection and healthy development.

Attachment theory, originating with Bowlby and extended by Ainsworth, defines attachment by function—proximity seeking, safe haven, secure base, and separation distress—rather than by the species of the figure. Empirical and theoretical work demonstrates that companion animals can fulfil these functions for many people. Complementary social support theory explains how animals also supply emotional support, companionship, belonging, stress buffering, and purpose. Research by Levinson, Barker and colleagues, Gee, Mueller, Johnson, and others maps psychological and physiological pathways (including oxytocin release and cortisol reduction) through which these bonds operate, with particular relevance to adolescents. The proposition that trust in a companion animal opens pathways to broader human connection has direct implications for programmes that thoughtfully pair young people with rescue animals.

What is Attachment? John Bowlby (1969/1982, 1973, 1980) proposed that humans are biologically predisposed to form enduring emotional bonds with figures who provide safety, comfort, and a secure base from which to explore. Attachment is defined by its adaptive functions: maintaining proximity to a protective figure, using that figure as a safe haven in times of threat or distress, employing it as a secure base that enables confident exploration, and experiencing separation distress when the figure is unavailable. These functions evolved to promote survival; the identity of the attachment figure is secondary to the fulfilment of the functions themselves (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Keefer et al., 2014).

Mary Ainsworth and colleagues operationalised these ideas through the Strange Situation procedure and clarified the concepts of secure base and safe haven (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Ainsworth, 1989). Securely attached individuals confidently explore while knowing a responsive figure remains available, and they seek comfort from that figure when distressed. Individual differences in attachment security arise from the consistency and sensitivity of caregiving and shape later relational expectations.

Because attachment is defined functionally rather than by species, the theoretical framework readily accommodates the question of whether non-human animals can

serve as attachment figures (Beck & Madresh, 2008; Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011; Sable, 2013).

Can Attachment Extend Beyond Humans? A growing body of research answers this question affirmatively. People report relationships with pets that meet the behavioural criteria of attachment: proximity maintenance, safe-haven use under stress, secure-base effects that support exploration or goal pursuit, and distress at separation (Kurdek, 2008, 2009; Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011, 2012; Rockett & Carr, 2014). Experimental work shows that the physical or even cognitive presence of a pet can lower blood pressure during a stressor and increase the number of life goals generated and confidence in attaining them—classic safe-haven and secure-base effects (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2012). Attachment measures adapted for pets yield reliable dimensions of anxiety and avoidance that predict expectations, emotions, and behaviour toward the animal, often independently of human attachment styles (Beck & Madresh, 2008; Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011).

Pets frequently score higher on security measures than romantic partners in the same individuals, suggesting they can provide a consistent source of felt security even when human relationships are strained (Beck & Madresh, 2008). This does not imply that animal attachments are identical to human ones in every respect, but it does establish that the core regulatory functions of attachment can be fulfilled across species.

Companion Animals as Attachment Figures Boris Levinson's pioneering observations in the 1950s and 1960s provided early clinical observations. When a withdrawn child spontaneously engaged with Levinson's dog Jingles, the animal acted as a social catalyst and helped facilitate engagement with the therapeutic relationship (Levinson, 1962, 1969). Levinson argued that animals could support engagement by offering non-judgemental acceptance and a bridge to human connection. These early observations are historically influential, but they should not be interpreted as evidence that Paws & Connect itself provides therapy.

Contemporary research confirms that companion animals can occupy the attachment-figure role across the lifespan. For children and adolescents, pets often rank among the most important relationships and are sought for comfort during emotional distress (Melson, 2003; Mueller, 2014). The bond is reciprocal in important ways: dogs display attachment-like behaviours toward their human caregivers in adaptations of the Strange Situation, using the owner as both secure base and safe haven (Topál et al., 1998; Gácsi et al., 2013; Solomon et al., 2019).

Companion Animals as Sources of Social Support Social support theory complements attachment theory. Companion animals furnish several recognised forms of support: emotional support (comfort, unconditional positive regard), companionship and a sense of belonging, stress buffering, and the provision of routine and purpose through

caregiving responsibilities (McConnell et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2015). These functions reduce loneliness and enhance perceived social resources even when human networks are limited.

Empirical studies link pet ownership and stronger pet attachment to lower loneliness, higher self-esteem, and better coping, particularly among adolescents facing developmental stressors or family adversity (Black, 2012; Mueller et al., 2014; Charmaraman et al., 2020). Longitudinal data indicate that relationship satisfaction with a pet predicts more favourable trajectories of loneliness, social anxiety, and depression in early adolescence, although the effects are nuanced and depend on the quality rather than mere presence of the relationship (Mueller et al., 2024).

Psychological and Biological Mechanisms Several interlocking mechanisms have been proposed to explain these associations. At the psychological level, animals may offer predictable, non-judgemental responsiveness that provides relational experiences different from, and potentially complementary to, those formed in human relationships. Interaction with animals has been associated with attention, engagement, emotional regulation and motivation in some educational and therapeutic settings (Gee et al., 2017; Pendry et al., 2021). Nancy Gee’s research programme provides evidence that human–animal interaction can support self-regulation and engagement in some contexts; however, these findings arise largely from specific animal-assisted or educational settings and should not be assumed to demonstrate the effects of the Paws & Connect model.

Physiologically, some studies of human–animal interaction—particularly with dogs—have reported short-term changes in oxytocin, cortisol, blood pressure or heart rate (Odendaal & Meintjes, 2003; Barker et al., 2005; Beetz et al., 2012; Nagasawa et al., 2015). Findings vary by context, participant characteristics and interaction, and these physiological findings should not be treated as proof of a specific developmental effect. Barker and colleagues have also reported short-term stress-buffering effects in some clinical and non-clinical samples (Barker et al., 2005, 2010, 2016). These findings provide one possible biological pathway through which some human–animal interactions may contribute to experiences of calm or stress regulation, but they do not establish causation for Paws & Connect.

Implications for Adolescents Adolescence is a period of heightened identity exploration, peer orientation, and vulnerability to loneliness and internalising symptoms. Secure attachments and reliable social support buffer these risks and support positive youth development (competence, confidence, connection, character, caring). Megan Mueller’s research has been particularly illuminating. Greater attachment to companion animals is associated with higher positive youth development scores among military-connected children, and the protective effect is strongest under conditions of parental deployment stress (Mueller & Callaghan, 2014; Mueller, 2014). Pet relationships can serve as a contextual asset that promotes intentional self-regulation, social skills, and resilience, especially when the bond is characterised by

satisfaction and mutual engagement rather than mere proximity (Mueller et al., 2024; Charmaraman et al., 2020).

Because animals do not demand sophisticated verbal or reciprocal social skills, they can provide a “safe” relational practice ground for adolescents who struggle with human peers or family conflict. Successful, trustworthy interactions with an animal may gradually generalise, increasing willingness to risk connection with humans—the core dynamic captured by the title proposition.

Why the Proposition Matters for Programmes Pairing Adolescents with Rescue Animals Organisations that carefully match adolescents with rescue animals operationalise the theoretical and empirical insights reviewed above. Rescue animals themselves often arrive with histories of disrupted relationships; the mutual process of building trust can be reparative for both parties. For the adolescent, the animal offers a non-judgemental attachment figure and source of social support that can reduce loneliness, regulate stress physiology, and scaffold emotional and social skills. For the animal, consistent, sensitive care from a young person provides security and purpose. The resulting reciprocal bond embodies Levinson’s insight that animals act as social catalysts: trust established with the animal can open the door to greater openness, empathy, and connection in human relationships.

Programme design should therefore prioritise relationship quality—matching temperament, ensuring welfare of both partners, providing scaffolding for caregiving skills, and monitoring the evolving bond—rather than simply placing an animal in an adolescent’s environment. When these conditions are met, the theoretical functions of attachment and social support become lived experiences that support developmental thriving.

Conclusion Attachment theory’s functional definition, Ainsworth’s secure-base and safe-haven constructs, Levinson’s early clinical vision, and the cumulative empirical work of Barker, Gee, Mueller, Johnson and others converge on a clear proposition: companion animals can serve as attachment figures and sources of social support. The psychological benefits of felt security and belonging, together with measurable physiological regulation via oxytocin and the HPA axis, help explain why these relationships matter. For adolescents navigating identity, autonomy, and connection, thoughtfully facilitated bonds with rescue animals offer a theoretically grounded pathway from trust to broader human relatedness. Continued rigorous research—especially longitudinal and experimental designs that examine mechanisms and individual differences—will further refine how programmes can harness this potential while safeguarding the welfare of both young people and the animals who share their lives.

Theoretical Summaries

Theory	Principal theorist(s)	Key contribution
Attachment Theory	Bowlby & Ainsworth	Explains how attachment functions can be fulfilled by companion animals.
Social Support Theory	Cobb, Cohen & Wills (or broader social support literature)	Explains emotional support, companionship, belonging and stress buffering.
Human–Animal Interaction (HAI)	Levinson; Gee; Barker; Mueller; Johnson	Explains the psychological and physiological mechanisms through which human–animal relationships promote wellbeing.

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3.3.3. 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 (Schore, 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 clinical intervention. What may be most valuable are repeated experiences of caring for, and being accepted by, another living being. A relationship with a rescued companion animal may provide consistency, acceptance, opportunities to contribute, and a sense of being needed. These ordinary relational processes are consistent with resilience theory and may support 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 activity. It creates a relational context in which fundamental developmental processes may unfold. Repeated positive interactions provide opportunities to practise regulation and social functioning; social and emotional competencies may be strengthened through experience; resilience may be supported through ordinary protective relationships; self-efficacy and agency may develop through mastery experiences; and basic psychological needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy may be supported.

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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3.3.4. Proposition 4: Healthy Development Builds Resilience

Healthy Development Builds Resilience: Matching Adolescents with Rescue Animals as a Pathway to Protective Processes

Abstract

Resilience is not a fixed personality trait possessed by some young people and lacking in others. It is a developmental capacity that grows through repeated experiences of safe relationships, competence, connection, and successful adaptation. This paper examines that proposition in the context of matching adolescents with rescue animals. Drawing on foundational work by Emmy Werner, Ann Masten, Michael Rutter, Suniya Luthar, and Andrew J. Martin, together with attachment theory, ecological systems theory, self-efficacy theory, and positive psychology, the paper argues that supportive relationships with companion animals can function as an additional protective system. Everyday responsibilities of animal care—feeding, walking, grooming, training, and comforting an anxious animal—provide mastery experiences that strengthen self-efficacy, emotional regulation, belonging, purpose, and identity. These processes do not eliminate adversity; they equip young people with internal and relational resources that enable more adaptive responses. The paper concludes that programs matching adolescents with rescue animals can deliberately cultivate the ordinary protective systems that research consistently links to resilience.

Keywords: resilience, adolescence, companion animals, ordinary magic, self-efficacy, attachment, ecological systems, identity

Resilience is not a personality trait that some young people possess and others lack. It is a developmental capacity that grows through repeated experiences of safe relationships, competence, connection, and successful adaptation. This central proposition organises the argument that follows. The paper examines how matching adolescents with rescue animals can contribute to healthy developmental processes that, in turn, build resilience. The claim is not that animals magically confer invulnerability or erase hardship. Rather, the everyday experiences of caring for a rescue animal create repeated opportunities to practise the very processes that developmental science has shown strengthen adaptive capacity. In doing so, such programs align with a growing body of evidence that resilience emerges from ordinary, everyday protective systems rather than from rare or extraordinary qualities.

What Is Resilience? Definitions, Misconceptions, and a Dynamic View

Contemporary developmental science has largely abandoned the idea of resilience as a rare or mysterious quality of “invulnerable” children. Early research on children growing up under conditions of poverty, family disruption, war, or trauma initially focused on deficit models and the prediction of pathology. What surprised investigators was the frequency with which many of these children nevertheless achieved competence in key

domains of adaptation. This observation led to a fundamental reconceptualisation of how adaptation under adversity is understood.

One of the earliest and most influential empirical foundations for this shift came from Emmy Werner's Kauai Longitudinal Study. Beginning in 1955, Werner and her colleagues followed a cohort of children born on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, many of whom faced multiple risk factors including perinatal complications, poverty, family discord, and parental mental illness (Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992, 2001). What emerged over decades of follow-up was striking: a substantial proportion of the high-risk children developed into competent, caring, and confident adults. Among the most consistent findings was the protective power of relationships. For many children exposed to significant adversity, the presence of even one stable, caring relationship—with a parent, grandparent, older sibling, teacher, or other adult—significantly altered developmental trajectories. That single reliable source of emotional support, encouragement, and consistent presence could buffer the impact of cumulative risk and open pathways toward positive adaptation.

Werner's work provided critical historical context for later resilience science. It demonstrated empirically that resilience was not the product of rare personal gifts but of ordinary human connections and resources that could be identified, protected, and strengthened. Her findings helped shift the field away from a sole focus on risk and pathology toward an examination of the protective processes that enable some children to thrive despite adversity. This emphasis on the transformative potential of even one caring relationship remains highly relevant to programs that introduce adolescents to supportive relationships with rescue animals, relationships that can themselves become sources of consistency, acceptance, and emotional security.

Building on this foundation, Masten's (2001) landmark paper framed resilience as "ordinary magic": the capacity for positive adaptation that arises from the normative operation of basic human adaptive systems rather than from extraordinary gifts or rare resources. Those systems include caring relationships with competent adults, effective problem-solving and self-regulation skills, opportunities to experience mastery and success, a positive sense of self, and supportive families, schools, and communities (Masten, 2001, 2014, 2025). When these ordinary systems are functioning reasonably well, many young people demonstrate the capacity to adapt successfully even under significant adversity. The greatest threats to development, Masten argued, are those that undermine or destroy these fundamental protective systems. The practical implication is profound: interventions need not invent extraordinary solutions; they can focus on protecting, restoring, and enhancing the ordinary systems that evolution and culture have already provided.

Rutter (1987, 2006, 2013), widely regarded as one of the founders of resilience research, emphasised that resilience is dynamic and interactive. It is inferred from better-than-expected outcomes in the presence of risk, and it develops over time through the interplay of risk and protective factors. Rutter stressed several key principles: resilience is not a fixed trait; no single protective factor is sufficient on its own; protective processes operate by reducing the impact of adversity, interrupting

negative chain reactions, promoting self-esteem and self-efficacy, and opening up new opportunities; and life-course “turning points” can redirect developmental trajectories. His work supports a systems approach in which multiple, interacting influences shape whether a young person adapts or becomes overwhelmed.

Luthar and colleagues (Luthar, 2006; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000) defined resilience as positive adaptation *despite* significant adversity. The construct therefore requires evidence of both substantial risk exposure and better-than-expected competence or adjustment. Critically, resilience does not mean the absence of distress or the pretence that everything is fine. Young people may struggle in some domains—experiencing anxiety, sadness, or behavioural difficulties—while adapting successfully in others, such as maintaining peer relationships, school engagement, or a sense of purpose. Luthar’s work reminds us that the goal is not invulnerability but the capacity to keep adapting in the face of real hardship.

Martin’s research on academic buoyancy (Martin & Marsh, 2008, 2009; Martin, 2013) adds a valuable distinction between everyday setbacks and major adversity. Academic buoyancy refers to students’ capacity to navigate the ordinary ups and downs of school life—poor grades, exam pressure, competing deadlines, difficult schoolwork—while academic resilience concerns more severe or chronic threats that constitute major assaults on educational progress. Martin proposes a hierarchical relationship: buoyancy is a necessary but not sufficient foundation for resilience. Successfully managing everyday challenges builds the confidence, regulatory skills, and adaptive strategies that later support coping with larger difficulties. This distinction maps directly onto animal-matching programs. The daily responsibilities of animal care—remembering to feed, managing a walk in bad weather, soothing an anxious animal, attending veterinary appointments—constitute precisely the kind of manageable, repeated challenges through which buoyancy, and ultimately broader resilience, can grow.

Taken together, these perspectives converge on a developmental account. Resilience is not a static trait that some adolescents simply have and others lack. It is a capacity that emerges and strengthens through repeated experiences of connection, competence, and successful adaptation within supportive contexts. Healthy development builds the internal and relational resources that later enable young people to respond more effectively when adversity arises.

Healthy Development Creates Protective Capacities

Healthy development builds the internal resources that later support resilience. Emotional regulation, a coherent sense of identity, competence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy are not merely correlates of resilience; they are developmental products that become protective when adversity is encountered. These capacities develop gradually through everyday interactions and experiences.

Attachment theory provides a foundational pathway. Secure relationships foster confidence, which enables exploration of the environment, which in turn produces

competence, which further strengthens resilience (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Ainsworth et al., 1978). When caregivers or other attachment figures provide a secure base and a safe haven, young people are freer to engage the world, practise skills, take manageable risks, and internalise a sense of being worthy of care and capable of coping. Insecure or disorganised attachment patterns, by contrast, are associated with difficulties in emotion regulation, higher stress reactivity, and reduced capacity to use social support effectively.

Companion animals can occupy a related, though not identical, relational niche. Research indicates that many children and adolescents form attachment-like bonds with pets, turning to them for comfort under stress and experiencing physiological calming through physical contact (Beetz et al., 2012; Kerns et al., 2018). Animals offer consistent, non-verbal responsiveness and acceptance that is less contingent on performance or mood than many human relationships. For adolescents with insecure human attachments, the predictable presence of an animal may provide a particularly accessible form of co-regulation and a corrective relational experience. Studies have shown that the presence of a dog can lower cortisol responses during stressful tasks more effectively than the presence of a friendly human for some children with insecure attachment patterns (Beetz et al., 2012). Such findings suggest that animals can function as supplementary attachment figures that support the development of regulatory capacities. Werner's demonstration that even one stable, caring relationship can shift trajectories finds a contemporary parallel in the potential of a consistent, supportive bond with a rescue animal.

Bandura's (1977, 1997) self-efficacy theory supplies a complementary and powerful mechanism. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to organise and execute the actions required to manage prospective situations. The strongest source of self-efficacy is mastery experience—direct, personal evidence that one can successfully perform valued tasks, especially when those tasks require sustained effort and the overcoming of obstacles. Vicarious experience (observing others succeed), verbal persuasion, and the interpretation of physiological and emotional states also contribute, but enactive mastery is primary. A resilient sense of efficacy is built not by a series of easy successes but by experiences of overcoming difficulties through perseverant effort.

Caring for a rescue animal supplies a steady stream of such mastery experiences. The adolescent must remember and reliably complete feeding schedules, manage walks in varying weather, learn to read the animal's signals of fear, excitement, or discomfort, help the animal settle into a new home after previous adversity, accompany it to veterinary appointments, and celebrate incremental progress in training or socialisation. Each successful episode—however modest—quietly communicates “I can handle difficult situations.” Over time these experiences accumulate into a more robust belief in one's capacity to cope, a belief that can generalise beyond the animal relationship to academic, social, and personal challenges. This is precisely the pathway Martin's work on buoyancy highlights: everyday successes build the confidence that supports later resilience in the face of larger adversity.

Positive psychology, particularly Seligman’s PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011), further illuminates the developmental processes involved. Rather than focusing solely on the reduction of distress or the pursuit of fleeting happiness, PERMA emphasises five elements of flourishing: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Animal care readily engages several of these elements simultaneously. The relationship with the animal itself provides positive connection; the sense of purpose derived from responsibility for another living being supplies meaning; the successful completion of daily care tasks and training goals yields accomplishment; and the focused attention required for attuned interaction fosters engagement. These experiences reinforce the strengths and relational resources that support resilience, shifting the developmental emphasis from deficit repair toward the cultivation of positive capacities.

Developing competence, belonging, self-efficacy and purpose gradually contributes to a more coherent sense of identity. Young people increasingly see themselves not simply as recipients of care, but as capable, responsible individuals able to contribute to the wellbeing of another living being. This shift in self-perception represents an important developmental achievement that itself becomes a protective factor supporting resilience. Identity coherence—knowing oneself as someone who can care, persist, and make a difference—provides an internal compass that helps adolescents navigate subsequent challenges with greater agency and hope.

Protective Relationships and Ecological Contexts Strengthen Resilience

Resilience is not created solely inside the child. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory reminds us that development occurs through reciprocal interactions across nested systems—the microsystem of immediate relationships (family, peers, school), the mesosystem of connections between those settings, the exosystem of broader community and institutional influences, and the macrosystem of cultural values and policies. Protective factors at multiple levels interact. A supportive family relationship gains additional power when the school climate is also nurturing and when community resources are accessible and coordinated. Matching programs that involve families, schools, and rescue organisations therefore operate at several ecological levels simultaneously, increasing the likelihood that protective processes will be sustained and reinforced across contexts.

Masten’s “short list” of protective factors—close relationships with competent, caring adults; effective caregiving; problem-solving and self-regulation skills; positive self-perceptions and self-efficacy; and supportive schools and communities—consistently emerges across decades of research and diverse cultural contexts (Masten, 2001, 2014, 2025). Supportive relationships with companion animals can be conceptualised as an additional entry on that list: another ordinary protective system that, when present and of good quality, contributes to the overall adaptive capacity of the developing person. The animal relationship does not replace human relationships; it supplements them and can, in some cases, create a bridge back to more positive human interactions by reducing isolation, providing a shared focus of care within the family, and modelling responsibility and empathy. Werner’s earlier insight—that one

stable caring relationship can be transformative—is extended here into a broader ecology in which multiple ordinary protective systems reinforce one another.

Rutter’s emphasis on the clustering of protective factors is relevant here. Protective influences tend to co-occur and to amplify one another. An adolescent who experiences competence through animal care may also experience enhanced belonging within the family (through shared responsibility), greater purpose, and improved emotional regulation. These effects can cascade, creating positive chain reactions that counteract the negative chain reactions often associated with cumulative adversity.

How Companion Animals Contribute to Resilience Processes: Research Themes

The contribution of companion animals can be organised around several interlocking themes supported by both theory and emerging empirical work on human–animal interaction in adolescence.

Safe relationships reduce stress. Secure attachment relationships are associated with lower physiological stress reactivity and better emotional regulation across the lifespan. Interactions with animals can produce measurable reductions in cortisol and subjective anxiety. The physical presence of a calm animal, combined with the predictable routines of care, offers co-regulation opportunities that help adolescents practise calming strategies. For young people whose human relationships have been inconsistent or stressful, the non-judgmental and consistent presence of an animal may be particularly regulating.

Emotional regulation. Young people who develop effective emotion-regulation skills cope more successfully with setbacks. Animals can reduce arousal through physical contact and presence, provide immediate non-verbal feedback, and encourage calming routines such as petting, walking, or quiet companionship. Qualitative reports from parents frequently describe pets helping adolescents regulate anger, loneliness, and distress (Charmaraman et al., 2022). The requirement to remain calm and patient while helping a fearful rescue animal settle can itself become a powerful practice ground for self-regulation.

Competence and mastery. Resilience grows when young people experience authentic success. The graded challenges of animal care—beginning with basic feeding and progressing to training, managing behavioural issues, or supporting an animal through medical procedures—create genuine mastery experiences that feed self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). These everyday successes accumulate into confidence that one can handle difficult situations. Martin’s distinction between buoyancy and resilience is useful here: the daily management of animal-related challenges builds the everyday adaptive capacity that later supports more robust resilience.

Belonging. One of the strongest and most consistent protective factors identified in resilience research is a sense of belonging and of being valued. Feeling valued by family, school, community, and—importantly—an animal creates belonging. The

animal's consistent presence, responsiveness, and apparent preference for the adolescent can convey acceptance that is less contingent than many human relationships. This sense of mattering supports identity development and buffers against isolation.

Purpose and meaning. Caring for another living being supplies responsibility, routine, and a sense that one's actions matter. Purpose consistently predicts better adaptation under stress and is a core element of flourishing in positive psychology frameworks. The commitment required by a rescue animal—especially one that has itself experienced adversity, abandonment, or trauma—can foster both meaning and hope. The adolescent is not merely a recipient of care; they become a provider of care, shifting identity toward competence and contribution.

Taken together, these processes illustrate the central developmental proposition of this paper: companion animals can create everyday opportunities for young people to practise processes associated with resilience, including responsibility, emotional regulation, empathy, self-efficacy, supportive relationships and the gradual formation of a more coherent and agentic identity. The matching of adolescents with rescue animals is therefore best understood as a structured developmental approach that seeks to create opportunities for these protective processes—not as a clinical intervention.

Implications for Practice and the Role of Supporting Systems

Healthy development does not guarantee that adversity will disappear. It equips young people with internal and relational resources that enable more effective responses to the challenges they encounter. Programs that thoughtfully match adolescents with rescue animals, and that support those matches with guidance, training, and ongoing support for families and communities, can deliberately strengthen the protective processes described above.

Several practical considerations follow from the theoretical framework. Matching should consider the individual adolescent's capacities, interests, and current level of regulation, as well as the animal's temperament and history, so that the relationship is more likely to generate mastery rather than overwhelming failure. Families and, where relevant, schools need support to integrate the animal's care into daily routines without creating additional unmanaged stress. Rescue organisations play a critical role in providing appropriate animals, training, and ongoing advice. When these systems coordinate—family, school, community services, and animal welfare organisations—the ordinary magic of relationships, competence, and connection has greater opportunity to operate across ecological levels.

It is also important to acknowledge complexity. Not every animal relationship is beneficial. Extreme or exclusive attachment to a pet in the context of very limited human support can sometimes accompany or even intensify loneliness (Hartwig & Signal, 2020). Quality of the relationship, the presence of supportive human adults, and the developmental appropriateness of the responsibilities all matter. The goal is not

simply pet ownership but the cultivation of a supportive, mastery-oriented relationship embedded within a broader ecology of care.

Resilient systems—families, schools, rescue organisations, and communities—also help sustain healthy development. When these systems work together to protect and enhance the ordinary adaptive systems identified by Werner, Masten, and others, they create the conditions in which individual resilience is more likely to emerge and grow.

Conclusion

The proposition that healthy development builds resilience is both theoretically robust and practically actionable. Resilience is a developmental capacity cultivated through repeated experiences of safety, competence, connection, and successful adaptation. It is ordinary magic, arising from the normative functioning of basic human adaptive systems rather than from rare or mysterious qualities.

Matching adolescents with rescue animals offers a concrete, relationally rich context in which those experiences can occur. Grounded in the pioneering longitudinal work of Werner, the ordinary-magic framework of Masten, Rutter's dynamic view of protective processes, Luthar's emphasis on positive adaptation despite adversity, Martin's distinction between buoyancy and resilience, Bandura's account of mastery and self-efficacy, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, attachment theory, and positive psychology, the argument presented here is that such programs can contribute to the ordinary protective systems that enable young people to keep adapting, even when life is hard.

Through safe, trusting relationships with companion animals, supported by families and communities, we can strengthen the protective processes of emotional regulation, competence, belonging, purpose, self-efficacy, and identity. In strengthening those processes, we strengthen the conditions under which resilience can emerge and grow. Healthy development does not remove adversity, but it builds the capacity to meet it with greater resources, greater hope, and greater possibility of positive adaptation.

Ultimately, resilience is neither extraordinary nor accidental. It grows through ordinary experiences of connection, responsibility, competence and care. By intentionally creating opportunities for those experiences through carefully supported relationships between adolescents and rescue animals, Paws & Connect seeks to cultivate the ordinary developmental processes through which extraordinary life trajectories can emerge.

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3.3.5. Positive Developmental Ripple Effects: Reciprocal Systems of Growth When Adolescents Are Carefully Matched With Rescue Animals

Abstract Careful matching of adolescents with rescue animals may generate developmental benefits that extend beyond the individual, although these wider effects remain an important area for evaluation. Drawing on ecological systems theory, transactional models of development, family systems theory, resilience science, community psychology and social capital research, this paper proposes that benefits of carefully supported relationships may create reciprocal feedback loops across nested systems. Potential outcomes include gains in

competence and relational capacity for young people; changes in family routines and communication; improved welfare and placement stability for animals; increased capacity for rescue organisations; possible transfer of developmental gains into school and community settings; and broader community engagement. These outcomes can be conceptualised as positive developmental ripple effects. Longer-term and intergenerational effects are hypotheses for future research rather than established outcomes of the proposed model.

Keywords: adolescent development, animal-assisted intervention, ecological systems, reciprocal processes, rescue animals, social capital, virtuous cycle, intergenerational

1. What Is a Systems Outcome?

A systems outcome is a change that alters the functioning, relationships, or capacity of an interconnected set of people, organisations, and environments rather than an isolated individual. In developmental science this distinction is fundamental. Individual-level outcomes—improved self-regulation, increased self-efficacy, reduced internalising symptoms—matter, yet they do not exhaust the developmental story. When an adolescent is carefully matched with a rescue animal, the primary gains begin within the young person. The decisive question of this final proposition is what happens next: how those gains reorganise the surrounding systems, and how the reorganised systems, in turn, sustain and amplify the young person’s development.

Most conventional youth programs seek to reduce risk, mitigate harm or strengthen protective factors. The model examined here begins from a complementary premise: carefully supported relationships may create opportunities for positive developmental processes that can influence surrounding systems. Safe, reciprocal relationships with animals may support trust and competence; these qualities may contribute to family climate and engagement in other settings; successful placements may strengthen rescue capacity; and networks of mutual support may create further opportunities for connection. These are proposed pathways to be examined through evaluation rather than assumed effects.

Systems thinking begins precisely at this point of reciprocity. The first four propositions in this series concern developmental processes within the young person and the relationship—how safe connection, attachment, competence and resilience may be supported. This fifth and final proposition asks what may happen when those changes interact with the surrounding systems. That is where systems analysis becomes important. Development is embedded within larger relational fields, and changes in one setting may influence others. The careful matching of adolescents with rescue animals can therefore be conceptualised as a systems-oriented developmental model with potential for cascading benefits, while recognising that the extent of those effects remains to be established empirically.

2. Development Is Reciprocal

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory provides the foundational architecture for understanding these ripple effects. In its mature bioecological formulation, development is defined as progressive, mutual accommodation between

an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which that person lives, as this process is affected by relations between settings and by the larger contexts in which those settings are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The model is organised as nested systems—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem—yet the decisive theoretical claim is not the nesting itself but the bidirectional character of influence. People shape their environments as environments shape people. Proximal processes—progressively more complex reciprocal interactions between the developing person and the persons, objects, and symbols in the immediate environment—are the primary engines of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These processes must endure over time, increase in complexity, and involve genuine reciprocity if they are to produce competence rather than dysfunction.

Arnold Sameroff's transactional model sharpens this insight and makes it analytically precise. Development is the continuous product of dynamic interactions in which the child and the caregiving environment continually alter each other (Sameroff, 2009; Sameroff & Chandler, 1975). Neither partner is static. Each transaction changes the probabilities of subsequent transactions. A young person's behaviour elicits responses from the environment; those responses reshape the young person's subsequent behaviour and self-understanding; the altered young person then elicits further environmental responses. The unit of analysis is the transaction itself. When an adolescent begins to care competently for a rescue animal—providing consistent feeding, exercise, training, and emotional attunement—the adolescent's behaviour changes the animal's security and the family's emotional climate. Those changes alter the adolescent's subsequent opportunities, expectations, and self-perceptions. The transaction is reciprocal by definition.

Ann Masten's developmental systems perspective on resilience reinforces and extends the same logic. Resilience is not an individual trait or extraordinary personal quality. It is the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to challenges that threaten its function, survival, or development (Masten, 2001, 2018, 2021). Protective systems—secure attachment relationships, self-regulation capacities, mastery motivation, effective schools, and supportive communities—strengthen one another. Gains in one protective system increase the probability of gains in others, producing cascades of positive adaptation. Masten's concept of "ordinary magic" is especially relevant: resilience usually arises from the normative operation of fundamental adaptive systems rather than from rare or heroic individual characteristics. When matching with a rescue animal strengthens one of these ordinary protective systems (for example, a reliable caregiving relationship that builds self-efficacy), it simultaneously supports adjacent systems.

Taken together, these frameworks suggest that adolescent development is systemic: development changes environments, and environments can in turn shape development. The matching relationship may initiate proximal processes that operate across the human–animal relationship and across nested human systems. The remainder of this paper traces possible ripple effects through family, animal, organisational, school and community levels, distinguishing theoretical pathways from outcomes that Paws & Connect will need to test.

3. Families Become Stronger

Murray Bowen's family systems theory supplies the mid-level mechanism through which individual change reorganises the family emotional field. Bowen conceptualised the family as an emotional unit in which members are intensely interconnected. A change in the functioning of one member produces compensatory changes throughout the system (Bowen, 1978). Differentiation of self—the capacity to remain emotionally connected while maintaining autonomous thinking and goal direction—is both an individual and a systemic process. When one member increases differentiation, the entire system has the opportunity to recalibrate.

In the context of careful adolescent–animal matching, several interrelated shifts commonly occur. The adolescent assumes responsible, consistent care for another living being: feeding, walking, training, monitoring health, and responding to behavioural cues. This new role often reduces parental anxiety about the adolescent's reliability and future. Conflict around household contribution, emotional reactivity, and perceived burden frequently declines. Communication becomes more task-focused and less affectively charged. Daily routines acquire greater predictability because the animal's needs impose a shared structure. The family's collective narrative about the young person can shift from “problem,” “burden,” or “at risk” toward competent contributor and caregiver.

These shifts are reciprocal rather than unidirectional. A less anxious, more supportive family climate provides the emotional security that allows the adolescent to risk further growth and to sustain the caregiving role under stress. The animal itself functions as a non-judgemental relational partner that can reduce triangulation and diffuse intensity within the family system. Because the animal's needs are concrete and immediate, family members often find common ground in practical problem-solving rather than in recrimination. The result is not merely improved dyadic relationships between parent and adolescent, but a measurable reorganisation of the emotional field of the household.

Family systems outcomes therefore include reduced overall anxiety, clearer role definitions, improved communication patterns, and greater predictability of daily life. These changes feed back into the adolescent's development, creating one of the central positive developmental ripple effects of the model: individual competence strengthens the family system, which in turn provides a more secure base for further individual development.

4. Animals Benefit

Any serious systems account must treat the animal as a subject with its own welfare interests rather than as a passive instrument of human development. Carefully matched placements produce measurable welfare gains for rescue animals. Secure, consistent relationships with an adolescent caregiver reduce chronic stress, improve behavioural stability, and increase adoptability. Animals experience safety, predictability, physical care, species-appropriate activity, and belonging—core

components of contemporary animal welfare frameworks. Successful matching lowers return-to-shelter rates, shortens cumulative time in temporary housing, and reduces the repeated stress of multiple transitions between foster homes or kennels.

Empirical work on temporary fostering and matching programmes provides evidence that consistent, positive human contact can influence shelter-dog welfare and that structured matching may be associated with improved placement outcomes (Gunter et al., 2019). However, the evidence base is not sufficient to conclude that the Paws & Connect model will produce the same effects. The animal's experience of security is therefore treated as a primary intended outcome to be monitored, rather than an assumed consequence.

The reciprocity is again evident and operates as a clear feedback loop. An animal that becomes more secure, socially responsive, and behaviourally settled provides the adolescent with clearer, more immediate feedback of competence and relational success. The deepening bond further improves the animal's welfare, which in turn consolidates the adolescent's sense of efficacy and responsibility. This cross-species transactional process is one of the most direct illustrations of Sameroff's principle operating beyond human relationships. The animal is not merely a beneficiary; it is an active participant in the proximal processes that drive development for both parties.

Rescue organisations and the broader animal welfare system also benefit when individual animals experience better outcomes. Higher rates of successful permanent placement free capacity for other animals in need. Reduced returns decrease the emotional and resource costs associated with failed placements. These organisational gains are examined more fully in the following section, yet they begin with the concrete welfare of the individual animal.

5. Rescue Organisations Benefit

Rescue organisations operate under chronic capacity constraints. High return rates, prolonged lengths of stay, limited foster homes, and volunteer burnout restrict the number of animals that can be helped. Careful adolescent–animal matching improves several organisational metrics simultaneously. Higher rates of successful permanent placement, lower return-to-shelter rates, reduced foster burden, more efficient use of limited kennel and foster resources, and greater volunteer and staff satisfaction when placements succeed all contribute to organisational resilience.

Matching processes that prioritise lifestyle fit, behavioural compatibility, and ongoing support before introduction further reduce failure rates. Research on matching programmes in dog adoptions indicates that structured conversations conducted prior to viewing animals, selective presentation of suitable candidates, and limitation of choice to well-matched options are associated with improved live-release metrics and reduced returns. When adolescents are prepared for the responsibilities of care and supported through the early stages of the relationship, the probability of long-term success rises.

Organisational success expands capacity in a self-reinforcing manner. More animals can be accepted from overcrowded shelters or community intake. More foster homes become available because existing fosters experience fewer crises and returns. Community confidence in the organisation grows when visible successes accumulate. A larger pool of future adopters, volunteers, and advocates is cultivated, many of whom may themselves be former adolescent participants who continue their involvement into adulthood. The adolescent participants often become peer educators, public advocates, or longer-term foster carers, extending organisational reach without proportional increases in professional staffing.

These organisational benefits constitute another positive developmental ripple effect. Successful matching strengthens the rescue system; a stronger rescue system creates more opportunities for carefully matched relationships; and those relationships generate further developmental gains for subsequent cohorts of young people and animals. The organisation is not merely a service provider; it becomes a node in the wider network of reciprocal growth.

6. Schools Benefit

Although the primary relationship is with the animal and the family, developmental gains may transfer into other settings, including school, through the connections among ecological systems. Improved self-regulation, competence and relational skills are associated in the broader developmental literature with positive functioning in educational settings. Research on animal-assisted interventions has also reported benefits in some school-aged populations (e.g., Jones et al., 2019), but those findings arise from different program models and should not be assumed to demonstrate effects of Paws & Connect. For this reason, any changes in school engagement, attendance or behaviour would be treated as outcomes to be explored where relevant and consented, not as expected or guaranteed effects.

When an adolescent experiences consistent success in a caregiving role outside school, that success can recalibrate teacher expectations and peer status. A young person previously viewed primarily through a deficit lens may begin to be recognised for reliability, empathy, or responsibility. These shifts in the school social environment create a more supportive climate that further scaffolds development. Attendance may improve because the young person has a reason to maintain routines and because school becomes less aversive. Engagement may rise because competence in one domain generalises. Behavioural incidents may decline because self-regulatory capacities strengthened through consistent animal care transfer to classroom demands.

The school, in turn, can reinforce the positive cycle. Recognition of the young person's growth, opportunities to share expertise (for example, speaking about responsible pet care), or informal mentoring roles can consolidate identity change. Mesosystem connections between family, rescue organisation, and school—when deliberately cultivated—amplify the developmental ripple effects. The school is not a passive recipient of individual change; it becomes an active participant in the reciprocal processes that sustain it.

7. Communities Benefit

At the community level the ripple effects accumulate as social capital and empowerment. Robert Putnam's analysis of social capital emphasises networks of trust, norms of reciprocity, and civic participation that enable collective action and mutual benefit (Putnam, 1995, 2000). Social capital exists in two primary forms: bonding capital (ties among similar people) and bridging capital (ties that cross social divides). Adolescents who move from passive recipients of services to active caregivers, volunteers, peer role models, and advocates increase both forms. They strengthen bonds within their immediate networks while simultaneously building bridges across generational, organisational, and sometimes socioeconomic boundaries through their engagement with rescue organisations and community education.

Julian Rappaport's empowerment framework provides the complementary community-psychology lens. Empowerment is the process by which people, organisations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs (Rappaport, 1987). It is not something professionals bestow; it is a process that occurs when people acquire greater access to and control over valued resources, including the resources of competence, voice, and belonging. When young people are positioned as contributors rather than clients—responsible for another living being's welfare—they experience themselves as agents. Communities that systematically create such roles become settings in which more citizens experience efficacy rather than dependence.

Downstream community-level outcomes include increased volunteering, greater empathy and prosocial behaviour, reduced isolation among both young people and older community members who may interact with the animals or the programme, and enhanced collective efficacy. Successful programmes also contribute to the broader animal-welfare culture of a community, raising expectations about responsible care and reducing the social acceptability of neglect or abandonment. These cultural shifts, while slower to develop, form part of the macrosystem context that shapes future developmental opportunities.

8. The Whole System Strengthens: A Virtuous Cycle

The preceding sections describe nested, reciprocal feedback loops that together constitute a virtuous cycle of advantage:

- Adolescent competence and responsibility → improved family emotional climate → reduced parental stress and conflict → greater family support and predictability → further adolescent growth and differentiation.
- Animal security and behavioural stability → adolescent sense of efficacy and relational success → deepening of the human–animal bond → further improvements in animal welfare → continued adolescent mastery experiences.
- Successful, lasting placements → expanded rescue organisational capacity and reduced resource strain → more animals helped and more foster opportunities

created → increased community confidence and visibility → larger pools of volunteers, adopters, and advocates.

- Individual developmental gains in self-regulation and relational capacity → improved school engagement, attendance, and behaviour → more positive teacher and peer responses → further consolidation of competence and belonging.
- Young people as active contributors → accumulation of bonding and bridging social capital → stronger community networks and collective efficacy → more opportunities for safe, reciprocal relationships for subsequent cohorts of young people and animals.

These loops are not merely additive; they are synergistic. Protective systems strengthen one another (Masten, 2018, 2021). Development changes environments and environments change development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Children and contexts continuously reshape each other through ongoing transactions (Sameroff, 2009). When one family member changes, the family system adapts (Bowen, 1978). Citizens who become active contributors empower their communities (Rappaport, 1987). Networks of trust and mutual benefit accumulate social capital that enables further collective action (Putnam, 2000).

Over time, such cycles may have the potential to extend across the life course, including through later volunteering, caregiving or community participation. However, intergenerational effects are a longer-term hypothesis rather than an established outcome of the proposed model. This possibility is included because Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem provides a useful framework for considering change across time, while Paws & Connect's evaluation approach remains appropriately cautious about claiming effects that have not yet been demonstrated.

The careful matching of adolescents with rescue animals can therefore be understood as a systems-oriented developmental model that seeks to create opportunities for positive ripple effects across the ecological field. It does not assume that such effects will occur automatically. Rather, the proposed pathway is that safe relationships may foster trust; trust may support healthy development and resilience; these changes may contribute to outcomes for individuals, families, animals, organisations, schools and communities; and stronger systems may in turn create further opportunities for safe relationships. The extent to which these pathways occur, and for whom, is an empirical question for Paws & Connect to examine.

The first four propositions in this series concern developmental change within the young person. This fifth and final proposition asks what happens when that young person changes. The answer is that the surrounding social and ecological systems become more capable of supporting healthy development for everyone embedded within them—including the animals themselves—and that these strengthened systems can, over time, transmit their advantages forward. Nothing in the model is one-way. Everything feeds back. That reciprocity, operating across both space and time, is the source of its systemic strength.

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Section Four: The Paws & Connect Evaluation Framework

4.1. Purpose of Evaluation

Evaluation at Paws & Connect exists to ensure that the relationships we carefully create remain safe, mutually beneficial and developmentally meaningful for both young people and companion animals. It is the practical expression of our commitment to evidence-informed practice, continuous learning and genuine accountability.

We evaluate in order to understand whether the conditions we create—thoughtful matching, structured support, and reciprocal care—actually produce the outcomes described in our Theory of Change. We evaluate so that we can improve. And we evaluate so that we can contribute responsibly to the wider knowledge base about what helps young people and rescued animals thrive together.

Evaluation is never treated as an administrative requirement or a fundraising tool. It is an ethical obligation that sits alongside animal welfare and youth safety. Every data point we collect, every review we conduct and every partnership we form must honour the same principles that guide the rest of our work: trust, safety, reciprocity, and respect for the individual journeys of both young people and animals.

4.2. Guiding Principles for Evaluation

- Both the young person and the animal are subjects of evaluation, never objects.
- Success is defined by the quality of the relationship and the mutual benefit it generates, not solely by placement numbers.
- Evaluation methods must themselves be trauma-informed, strengths-based and proportionate.
- Data collection should never compromise the safety, dignity or wellbeing of participants or animals.
- Learning is shared with families, young people (in age-appropriate ways), rescue partners and the wider community.
- Continuous improvement is expected and documented.
- External research partnerships are welcomed when they strengthen practice and protect participants.

4.3. Outcome Measures

Paws & Connect measures outcomes across five interconnected domains that reflect the full Theory of Change: youth development, animal welfare, family and relational systems, program fidelity, and wider systems effects. Outcomes are organised as short-term (during the supported relationship), intermediate (at key review points and post-placement), and longer-term (sustained change and ripple effects).

4.4. Youth Developmental Outcomes

Short-term

- Increased sense of safety and trust within the relationship with the animal
- Regular engagement in care routines and reciprocal interactions
- Emerging sense of competence and responsibility

Intermediate

- Improved emotional regulation and ability to manage everyday challenges
- Growth in empathy, perspective-taking and relational skills
- Strengthened self-efficacy and belief in one's capacity to care and contribute
- Increased sense of belonging and purpose

Longer-term

- Sustained protective factors associated with resilience (secure relational experiences, mastery, belonging)
- Positive identity development as a capable and caring person
- Transfer of relational skills and confidence into other domains of life (family, school, peers)

4.5. Animal Welfare Outcomes

Short-term

- Observable reduction in stress-related behaviours (where these can be reasonably noted by program staff or carers)
- Evidence of voluntary approach, relaxed body language and positive engagement with the young person
- Consistent meeting of species-appropriate physical and behavioural needs

Intermediate

- Improved behavioural stability and confidence in the home environment
- Successful adaptation to routines and family life
- Evidence of increasing trust, security and comfort within the household

Longer-term

- Secure, lasting placement (foster progression to adoption or successful direct adoption)
- Sustained physical health, behavioural wellbeing and quality of life
- Reduced likelihood of return to shelter or repeated disruption

4.6. Family and Relational Systems Outcomes

- Increased family capacity to support the young person–animal relationship
- Improved communication, shared routines and reduced household conflict related to care responsibilities

- Greater parental/carer confidence in the young person's reliability and growth
- Strengthened sense of collective purpose and mutual support within the household

4.7. Program Fidelity and Process Outcomes

- Quality and thoroughness of the matching process (family readiness, young person readiness, animal profile, compatibility assessment, supervised meeting and reflection)
- Consistency of ongoing support, review points and responsive problem-solving
- Adherence to safeguarding, animal welfare and ethical standards
- Participant experience of the process as respectful, supportive and non-judgemental

4.8. Systems and Ripple-Effect Outcomes

- Successful permanent placements and reduced return rates for partner rescue organisations
- Contribution to the capacity and confidence of rescue partners
- Positive feedback from schools or other systems regarding engagement or behaviour (where relevant and consented)
- Evidence of reciprocal benefit flowing back into families, rescue organisations and the wider community

We do not measure “effects on the young person” in isolation. We seek to understand whether a carefully supported relationship is associated with mutual growth, while remaining open to findings that challenge or refine the Theory of Change.

4.9. Measuring What Paws & Connect Seeks to Change

The Evaluation Framework is deliberately aligned with the propositions that underpin the Theory of Change and the Practice Framework. This alignment makes the intellectual architecture of Paws & Connect transparent: the organisation has stated what it believes, designed practice to enact those beliefs, and now specifies how it will test whether the intended changes are occurring.

Proposition 5: Positive developmental ripple effects may extend beyond the dyad → Indicators of family capacity, placement stability and animal welfare, rescue-partner outcomes, and—where relevant and consented—changes in other settings such as school or community participation.

Proposition 4: Healthy development builds resilience → Indicators of sustained protective factors, self-efficacy, adaptive coping, belonging, purpose and positive identity development over time.

Proposition 3: Connection supports healthy development → Indicators of reciprocal interaction, empathy, perspective-taking, mutual responsiveness, shared routines and any transfer of relational skills beyond the animal relationship.

Proposition 2: Companion animals can become attachment figures and sources of social support → Indicators of relationship quality, comfort-seeking, companionship, perceived support, belonging and the young person's experience of the animal as a reliable relational presence.

Proposition 1: Safe, trusting relationships foster healthy development → Indicators of safety, trust, self-efficacy, belonging, emotional regulation and relational capability in the young person, alongside indicators of security, comfort and reduced stress-related behaviour in the animal.

By making these links explicit, evaluation remains focused on the core claims of the organisation rather than on generic measures of wellbeing or placement volume. It also ensures that learning feeds directly back into matching practice, support processes and organisational improvement.

4.10. Indicators and Measurement Approach

Clear outcomes require clear indicators—specific, observable signs that the intended change is occurring. The table below illustrates the logical pathway from outcome to indicator to evidence source. It is deliberately practical rather than exhaustive. Validated scales are used only where they add genuine value without creating unnecessary burden for young people, families or animals.

Outcome domain	Example outcome	Possible indicators	Primary evidence sources
Youth development	Increased self-efficacy	Confidence completing care tasks; willingness to take on new responsibilities; statements of competence	Young person reflection; caregiver observation; program notes
Youth development	Increased sense of trust and safety	Willingness to approach the animal; consistent, relaxed interaction; reduced avoidance	Young person report; structured observation; caregiver feedback
Youth development	Growth in empathy and relational skills	Noticing and responding to animal signals; describing the animal's needs; showing patience	Observation; young person reflection; caregiver report
Animal welfare	Reduced stress-related behaviour and increased comfort	Relaxed body language; voluntary approach; settled routines; fewer observable stress behaviours	Observation by staff/carers; caregiver report; notes from rescue partners

Outcome domain	Example outcome	Possible indicators	Primary evidence sources
Animal welfare	Increasing trust and security in the household	Seeking proximity; relaxed resting near the young person; positive response to care routines	Observation; caregiver and rescue partner feedback
Relationship quality	Reciprocity and mutual responsiveness	Mutual approach; shared calm or play; young person adjusting behaviour to the animal's needs	Structured observation; young person and caregiver reflection
Placement stability	Continuation of placement without disruption	Ongoing placement at review points; absence of return or early ending for relationship reasons	Program records; rescue partner data
Family systems	Improved household support and reduced conflict	Shared routines; positive family comments about the young person's contribution; fewer care-related tensions	Caregiver feedback; program review notes
Program fidelity	Quality of matching and support	Documented matching process completed; review points held; responsive adjustments made	Program records; staff reflection

4.11. Boundary note on animal assessment

Paws & Connect observes and records behavioural and relational indicators that can reasonably be noted by trained program staff and carers. Where specialist assessment of stress, behaviour or health is required, this is undertaken by veterinary professionals or qualified behavioural practitioners. Program staff do not conduct formal physiological or clinical behavioural assessments beyond their competence and role.

Indicators are reviewed and refined over time as the organisation learns what is most meaningful and feasible to observe. The emphasis remains on practical, relationally grounded evidence rather than on complex psychometric batteries.

4.12. Data Collection

Data collection is designed to be ethical, practical, proportionate and consistent with the values of the program. It draws on multiple sources and methods so that both the lived experience of the relationship and more structured indicators can be understood.

Timing

- Baseline (pre-matching or at the point of matching)
- Early check-in (within the first 2–4 weeks of placement)

- Structured review points (approximately 6–8 weeks, 3 months, 6 months, and 12 months, adjusted to pathway and individual circumstances)
- Transition or exit points (end of foster period, adoption confirmation, or relationship ending)
- Follow-up where feasible and consented (6–12 months post-formal support)

Methods and Sources

- Structured conversations and strengths-based interviews with the young person (age-appropriate and consented)
- Feedback from parents/carers on family functioning, routines and observed changes
- Observational notes from program staff and rescue partners on the quality of interaction and animal behaviour
- Simple, validated or adapted scales measuring relevant constructs (e.g., aspects of self-efficacy, emotional regulation, sense of belonging, or relationship quality) where these add value without creating burden
- Veterinary and behavioural information provided by rescue partners or qualified professionals (with appropriate consent and data-sharing agreements)
- Brief reflective journals or check-in tools completed by the young person where they wish to participate
- Program records of matching decisions, support provided and any adjustments made

Ethical and Practical Safeguards

- Informed consent and, where appropriate, assent processes that are clear, ongoing and easily withdrawn
- Trauma-informed approaches that prioritise safety, choice and control
- Strict privacy and data-protection protocols consistent with relevant legislation
- Clear boundaries so that evaluation never becomes an additional source of pressure or surveillance
- Animal welfare always takes precedence; no data collection method may cause stress or compromise care
- Data are used primarily for learning and improvement; secondary research use occurs only with appropriate ethics approval and further consent

Responsibility for data collection sits with trained program staff, supported by clear protocols and, where capacity allows, external evaluation partners. Data quality is reviewed regularly as part of the continuous improvement cycle.

4.13. Continuous Improvement

Evaluation data feed a deliberate learning cycle. Paws & Connect treats every placement, every review and every piece of feedback as an opportunity to refine matching, support and organisational practice.

The improvement process includes:

- Regular internal review meetings (at least quarterly, and after each cohort or significant placement period) in which outcome and process data are examined together by program leadership and frontline staff
- Structured reflection on questions such as: What is working well and for whom? Where are relationships flourishing or struggling? What adjustments to matching criteria, support intensity or timing would strengthen mutual benefit?
- Use of simple improvement cycles (Plan–Do–Study–Act or equivalent) to test small, practical changes
- Documentation of adaptations so that organisational learning accumulates over time
- Feedback loops that close the circle: young people, families and rescue partners are informed, in appropriate ways, how their experience has shaped practice
- An annual internal learning summary that identifies patterns, celebrates strengths and sets priorities for the coming period

Continuous improvement is not reactive crisis management. It is a planned, values-driven process that keeps the program aligned with its philosophy and Theory of Change as it grows.

4.14. Privacy and Information handling policy

4.14.1. Purpose

Paws & Connect is committed to protecting the privacy, dignity and personal information of every person with whom we work. This policy explains how Paws & Connect collects, uses, stores, shares, accesses, corrects, retains and securely disposes of personal, sensitive and health information.

Because Paws & Connect works with adolescents and families and may receive assessment, well-being, safety and matching information, privacy is treated as an essential part of safeguarding and ethical practice.

4.14.2. Scope

This policy applies to Paws & Connect committee members, staff, volunteers, contractors and any other person authorised to handle information on behalf of Paws & Connect. It applies to information relating to adolescents, parents and carers, foster carers or host families, rescue organisations, supporting professionals, staff, volunteers, applicants, donors and other people who engage with Paws & Connect.

Partner organisations remain responsible for their own legal and privacy obligations. Where personal information is shared between Paws & Connect and a partner, the sharing arrangement must be clear, limited to what is necessary and subject to appropriate confidentiality and privacy safeguards.

4.14.3. Guiding principles

Collect only information that is reasonably necessary for Paws & Connect's functions and activities.

Collect information lawfully, fairly and, wherever practicable, directly from the person concerned.

Use clear, age-appropriate explanations so people understand what is being collected, why it is needed and how it may be used or shared.

Apply data minimisation: Paws & Connect will not collect information merely because it may be interesting or potentially useful.

Use and disclose information only for the purpose for which it was collected, a directly related and reasonably expected purpose, with appropriate consent, or where otherwise permitted or required by law.

Limit access according to role and genuine need to know.

Take reasonable steps to keep information accurate, current, secure and protected from misuse, loss, unauthorised access, modification or disclosure.

Respect the participation, privacy and developing autonomy of adolescents in decisions about their information.

Use de-identified or aggregated information wherever identifiable information is not required.

4.14.4. Types of information

Paws & Connect distinguishes between general organisational information and personal information requiring stronger protections.

4.14.4.1. Adolescents and families

Identifying and contact information, including name, date of birth, address, contact details and emergency contacts.

Assessment and matching information, including interests, living arrangements, family circumstances, readiness, preferences, suitability considerations and matching outcomes.

Relevant safety, risk, health or wellbeing information where it is genuinely necessary to support safe participation, matching or ongoing support.

Consent, communication, incident, complaint and support records where relevant.

4.14.4.2. Rescue organisations and animals

Organisational and contact information.

Information about individual animals, including history, temperament, behaviour, health and care needs, where relevant to assessment and matching.

Information about organisational capacity, placement arrangements and support relevant to the program.

4.14.4.3. Foster carers, host families and other participating adults

Identifying and contact information.

Household and suitability information relevant to participation or matching.

Screening and safeguarding information where required.

4.14.4.4. Committee members, staff, volunteers and supporting professionals

Contact, role and emergency information.

Working with Children Check (WWCC) status and other screening information required for the role.

Police-check information where a police check is required.

Professional qualifications, registrations, experience or role-related information where relevant.

4.14.2. Sensitive, health and screening information

Paws & Connect recognises that health and wellbeing information, criminal-history information and some assessment information require particularly careful handling. Such information will only be collected where it is genuinely relevant and necessary to Paws & Connect's functions, safeguarding responsibilities or legal obligations.

Where practical, Paws & Connect will record verification of a WWCC, police check or other clearance rather than retaining unnecessary copies of identity documents or detailed background-check material. Access to screening information will be restricted to authorised persons with a legitimate safeguarding, governance or compliance responsibility.

4.14.3. Collection and notification

At or before the time information is collected, or as soon as practicable afterwards, Paws & Connect will explain in clear language:

- what information is being collected and why;

- whether providing particular information is required or optional and any relevant consequences of not providing it;

- how the information is likely to be used;

- the types of people or organisations to whom it may be disclosed;

- how the person can seek access to or correction of their information; and

- how to raise a privacy concern or complaint.

Separate collection notices, consent forms or participant information statements may be used for particular activities rather than relying on this policy alone.

4.14.4. Consent and adolescents

Paws & Connect will seek meaningful, informed and age-appropriate participation from adolescents in decisions about their personal information. Consent must be informed, voluntary, current and specific, and the person giving consent must have the capacity to understand what is proposed.

Capacity is not determined solely by age. Where consent is required, Paws & Connect will consider the adolescent's maturity and understanding and the nature and sensitivity of the information involved. A parent, guardian or other authorised representative may provide consent where appropriate or required. Paws & Connect will develop operational guidance for consent and capacity decisions and will seek professional or legal advice where a situation is complex.

Withdrawal of consent will be respected to the extent possible, but it may not require Paws & Connect to delete information that must lawfully be retained or that may otherwise be lawfully used or disclosed.

4.14.5. Use and sharing of information

Personal information will be used and shared only to the extent reasonably necessary for assessment, matching, program delivery, ongoing support, safeguarding, evaluation, governance, reporting or another lawful purpose.

When information is shared with a rescue organisation, supporting professional or other partner, Paws & Connect will apply a minimum-necessary approach. A partner should receive only the information reasonably required for its role in the particular matter.

Information may also be used or disclosed without consent where authorised or required by law, including where applicable to child-safety reporting, responding to a serious threat, court or tribunal orders, or lawful requests from authorities.

Paws & Connect will not sell or rent personal information.

4.14.6. Access controls and confidentiality

Access to identifiable adolescent and family information is limited to authorised people whose role requires it.

Screening and background-check information is restricted to authorised safeguarding, governance or compliance personnel.

Committee members, staff, volunteers and contractors must maintain confidentiality and follow Paws & Connect information-handling procedures.

Information must not be accessed out of curiosity, discussed in inappropriate settings, or shared through unauthorised channels.

Where information is used for evaluation, reporting, presentations or funding applications, it will ordinarily be aggregated or de-identified unless identifiable use is necessary, lawful and appropriately consented to.

4.14.7. Storage and security

Electronic information will be stored in approved, access-controlled systems protected by strong authentication and other reasonable security measures.

Multi-factor authentication will be used where available for systems containing sensitive information.

Access permissions will be reviewed when roles change or a person leaves Paws & Connect.

Highly sensitive information will not be stored on unsecured personal devices or in unapproved personal cloud-storage accounts.

Physical records, if used, will be stored securely with access limited to authorised people.

Sensitive information should not be sent through insecure channels where a safer reasonable alternative is available.

Backups, system permissions and security practices will be proportionate to the sensitivity and volume of information held.

4.14.8. Accuracy, access and correction

Paws & Connect will take reasonable steps to keep personal information accurate, complete and up to date where this is relevant to its use.

Individuals may ask what personal information Paws & Connect holds about them and may request access to or correction of that information. Requests will be handled in accordance with applicable law. Access may be limited in circumstances permitted by law, including where providing access would unreasonably affect another person's privacy or create another legally recognised risk.

Requests should be directed to the designated Privacy Officer or privacy contact listed at the end of this policy.

4.14.9. Retention and secure disposal

Paws & Connect will not retain personal information indefinitely simply because it may be useful in the future. Records will be retained for the period required by applicable law, safeguarding requirements, contractual or funding obligations, insurance requirements and legitimate operational needs.

A separate Records Retention and Disposal Schedule will specify retention periods for different record classes, including participant and matching records, child-safety and incident records, screening records, volunteer and personnel records, consent records and governance records.

When information is no longer required to be retained, it will be securely destroyed or permanently de-identified using a method appropriate to the format and sensitivity of the information.

4.15.10. Data breaches and privacy incidents

Any suspected loss, unauthorised access, disclosure, alteration or misuse of personal information must be reported promptly to the designated Privacy Officer or other authorised person.

Paws & Connect will:

- take immediate reasonable steps to contain the incident;
- preserve relevant evidence and establish what information and people may be affected;
- assess the likelihood and seriousness of harm;
- take remedial steps where possible;
- notify affected individuals, regulators or other authorities where required by applicable law; and
- review the incident and improve systems or practices where necessary.

Paws & Connect will maintain a documented Data Breach Response Procedure. References to notification under the Commonwealth Notifiable Data Breaches scheme will apply where Paws & Connect is legally subject to that scheme.

4.14.11. Child safety and information sharing

Privacy does not prevent Paws & Connect from acting to protect a child or young person. Information will be handled consistently with applicable child-safety, mandatory-reporting and information-sharing obligations. Staff and volunteers must understand that confidentiality has limits where safety concerns require information to be reported or lawfully shared.

Child-safety records will be created, stored and retained in accordance with Paws & Connect's Child Safety and Wellbeing Policy, reporting procedures and Records Retention and Disposal Schedule.

4.14.12. Third-party services and partner organisations

Before using a third-party service to store or process sensitive personal information, Paws & Connect will consider the nature of the information, security arrangements, access controls, location of data where relevant, contractual protections and applicable privacy requirements.

Where Paws & Connect shares personal information with a partner organisation, the respective responsibilities for collection, storage, use, disclosure, access, correction, retention and breach response should be documented where appropriate. Paws & Connect will not state or assume that another organisation is bound by this policy unless that obligation has been formally agreed.

4.14.13. Complaints and concerns

Privacy concerns or complaints will be taken seriously and handled respectfully, promptly and as confidentially as practicable. Paws & Connect will explain the outcome of a complaint and any available review or external complaint options where applicable.

Privacy contact: [insert role/name and email address]

4.14.14. Responsibilities

The Paws & Connect Committee is responsible for oversight of this policy and ensuring appropriate governance arrangements are in place.

A designated Privacy Officer or equivalent role will coordinate privacy enquiries, access and correction requests, privacy incidents and policy implementation.

All committee members, staff, volunteers and contractors who handle information are responsible for complying with this policy and associated procedures.

Managers or program leads are responsible for ensuring access to information is appropriate to each person's role and is removed when no longer required.

4.14.15. Related policies and procedures

Child Safety and Wellbeing Policy

Screening and Background Checks Policy

Code of Conduct

Consent and Information Sharing Procedure

Records Retention and Disposal Schedule

Data Breach Response Procedure

Complaints and Feedback Policy

Risk Management Policy

Information Security / Acceptable Use Procedure (when developed)

4.14.16. Legal and regulatory framework

This policy is intended to operate consistently with privacy, health-information and child-safety requirements that apply to Paws & Connect. Relevant frameworks may include the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) and Australian Privacy Principles where applicable, the Health Records Act 2001 (Vic) and Health Privacy Principles, the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 (Vic) and Victorian Child Safe Standards, and other applicable information-sharing, recordkeeping and safeguarding laws.

Because the application of particular privacy laws can depend on Paws & Connect's legal structure, activities, funding arrangements and the information it handles, the organisation will confirm its specific legal obligations as operations develop and obtain legal or specialist advice where required.

4.14.17. Review

This policy will be reviewed at least annually during Paws & Connect's establishment phase, and earlier if there is a significant change to legislation, regulatory guidance, organisational activities, information systems, partnerships or identified privacy risks.

Appendix A – Operational documents to develop

Privacy collection notice for adolescents and families
Age-appropriate privacy information for adolescents
Participant consent and information-sharing form
Partner information-sharing agreement or protocol
Records Retention and Disposal Schedule
Data Breach Response Procedure
Access and Correction Request Procedure
Register of systems holding personal or sensitive information

4.14. Research Partnerships

Paws & Connect is committed to contributing to the evidence base on carefully matched, supported relationships between young people and rescued companion animals. We recognise that rigorous external research strengthens both practice and credibility, provided it is conducted ethically and in genuine partnership.

We therefore:

- Actively seek collaborative relationships with universities, research centres and specialist institutes in youth development, human–animal interaction, veterinary behavioural science, social work and related fields
- Welcome independent evaluation and co-designed studies that examine mechanisms, outcomes and longer-term trajectories
- Prioritise research designs that treat both the young person and the animal as subjects of equal ethical concern
- Require that any research activity holds appropriate human research ethics and animal ethics approval, and that participation remains voluntary and non-coercive
- Share findings in ways that benefit the field, including practice-oriented publications, conference presentations and open learning with other organisations working at the intersection of youth wellbeing and animal welfare
- Maintain clear principles for partnership: mutual benefit, protection of privacy and welfare, alignment with the reciprocity philosophy, and respect for the primary relationship between young person and animal

Research is never allowed to override the needs of the individuals in the relationship. The relationship comes first; knowledge generation follows.

4.15. Closing Statement

The Evaluation Framework exists so that Paws & Connect remains true to its deepest commitments. We measure what matters: the growth of trust, the flourishing of belonging, the reciprocal strengthening of young people and animals, and the wider systems that support them. We collect data carefully and use it wisely. We improve deliberately. And we invite rigorous external scrutiny so that the field as a whole can learn.

In doing so, we honour the quiet moment on the lounge-room floor that began this work—the patient, consistent offering of safety that allowed a frightened kitten to trust, and that continues to guide every relationship we help create.

Every young person deserves the chance to experience trust. Every rescue animal deserves the chance to belong. Evaluation helps ensure that when those journeys begin together, they are given every possible opportunity to succeed.

Section Five: The Paws & Connect Governance Framework

5.1. Purpose of Governance

Governance at Paws & Connect exists to protect the integrity of the organisation's purpose, the safety and dignity of every young person and animal involved, and the trust placed in us by families, rescue partners and the wider community. It provides the structures, accountabilities and ethical boundaries that allow the philosophy, practice framework, Theory of Change and evaluation framework to be enacted with consistency, transparency and care.

Good governance is not an administrative overlay. It is the practical expression of our core values: trust, connection, safety, belonging and growth. It ensures that decisions about matching, support, partnerships and organisational development remain aligned with the belief that animals are partners, not tools, and that every relationship we help create must be safe, reciprocal and developmentally meaningful.

As an Australian not-for-profit charity, Paws & Connect is committed to meeting the governance standards expected by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) and to aligning with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations and relevant state and territory child-safety requirements. Governance arrangements will continue to mature in proportion to the organisation's size, complexity and risk profile.

5.2. Board Structure and Responsibilities

Paws & Connect is governed by a Board of Directors that holds ultimate legal and ethical responsibility for the organisation. The Board's role is to provide strategic oversight, ensure financial and operational accountability, safeguard the organisation's purpose, and support the Chief Executive (or equivalent leadership role) in the delivery of the program.

Composition The Board is intentionally multidisciplinary. It seeks members with complementary expertise in areas such as:

- Youth development, education or social work
- Animal welfare, veterinary science or rescue sector experience
- Governance, finance, law or risk management
- Community engagement, philanthropy or not-for-profit leadership

Where possible, the Board includes people with lived experience relevant to the work of Paws & Connect, while maintaining clear boundaries between governance and operational roles. Board composition and skills are reviewed periodically to ensure ongoing fitness for purpose.

Core responsibilities of the Board

- Setting and regularly reviewing the organisation's strategic direction in light of its philosophy and Theory of Change
- Ensuring the organisation remains true to its dual commitment to youth wellbeing and animal welfare
- Overseeing financial sustainability, risk management and compliance with ACNC governance standards and other applicable regulatory requirements
- Appointing, supporting and holding the Chief Executive to account
- Approving major policies, including those relating to safeguarding, animal welfare, ethics, data protection and partnerships
- Monitoring organisational performance through the Evaluation Framework and other reporting
- Ensuring transparent and ethical relationships with funders, rescue partners, schools and community organisations
- Modelling the values of the organisation in its own conduct and decision-making

Board operations The Board meets regularly according to an agreed annual schedule. It maintains clear role descriptions, conflict-of-interest procedures, and a skills matrix. Sub-committees or working groups may be established for specific areas (for example, finance and risk, or animal welfare and partnerships) as the organisation grows. The Board ensures that governance practices remain proportionate, transparent and consistent with the expectations of a registered Australian charity.

5.3. Ethics

Ethical practice is foundational to every aspect of Paws & Connect. The organisation operates within a clear ethical framework that prioritises the safety, dignity and agency of young people, the welfare of animals, and the integrity of relationships with families and partners.

Key ethical commitments

- **Primacy of relationship quality and safety.** No placement or activity proceeds if it compromises the emotional or physical safety of the young person or the animal.

- **Informed consent and ongoing choice.** Participation is voluntary. Young people (with age-appropriate assent) and families provide informed consent, and this consent can be reviewed or withdrawn.
- **Animals as partners.** Animals are never treated as therapeutic tools, interventions or means to an end. They are sentient beings with their own needs, histories and welfare, which are considered alongside the wellbeing of the young people we support.
- **Transparency and honesty.** Matching decisions, support limitations, risks and uncertainties are communicated clearly and respectfully.
- **Confidentiality and privacy.** Personal information about young people, families and animals is handled in accordance with the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth), the Australian Privacy Principles (where applicable), and organisational policy.
- **Non-discrimination and inclusion.** The organisation seeks to work respectfully with diverse young people, families and communities, while remaining realistic about the conditions required for a successful match.
- **Boundaries of competence.** Paws & Connect does not provide clinical mental-health treatment, veterinary diagnosis or specialised behavioural therapy. Where such expertise is required, appropriate referrals are made.
- **Accountability.** Staff, volunteers and Board members are expected to uphold these commitments and to raise concerns through clear, accessible channels.

An Ethics Policy sits alongside the Practice Framework and is reviewed periodically by the Board. Ethical dilemmas that arise in practice are discussed in supervision and, where appropriate, brought to the Board or an external advisor for guidance.

5.4. Animal Welfare

Animal welfare is not a secondary consideration at Paws & Connect; it is a core organisational responsibility equal in weight to the wellbeing of young people. This commitment flows directly from the guiding principle that animals are partners, not tools.

Animal welfare standards

- Every animal placed through Paws & Connect must come from a partner rescue organisation that meets recognised welfare standards (including vaccination, microchipping, desexing, veterinary health checks and behavioural assessment appropriate to the species).
- Matching decisions explicitly consider the animal's temperament, history, needs and capacity to thrive in the proposed environment.
- Ongoing support includes attention to the animal's physical health, behavioural wellbeing and quality of life.
- If a placement is not working despite reasonable support, the welfare of both the young person and the animal remains paramount. Rematching or alternative placement is approached without blame and with care for both parties.

- Program staff observe and record relevant behavioural and relational indicators. Specialist assessment of health or complex behaviour is undertaken by veterinary or qualified behavioural professionals.
- Data collection and evaluation never compromise animal welfare.

Paws & Connect works in formal partnership with rescue organisations. These partnerships are governed by written agreements that clarify respective responsibilities for animal selection, information sharing, support and decision-making about the continuation or ending of a placement.

The Board receives regular reporting on animal welfare indicators (including placement stability, returns and any significant welfare concerns) as part of its oversight role.

5.5. Safeguarding and Child Protection

Paws & Connect is committed to providing a child-safe environment for every young person who participates in its programs. Safeguarding is treated as a distinct and non-negotiable governance responsibility, reflecting the organisation's work with children and young people and its alignment with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations and applicable state and territory legislation.

Child-safe organisational culture The organisation fosters a culture in which the safety and wellbeing of young people is prioritised in every decision. This culture is modelled by the Board, leadership and all staff and volunteers. Young people and families are encouraged to raise concerns, and these are treated seriously and respectfully.

Staff and volunteer screening and suitability All staff, volunteers and Board members who have contact with young people are required to hold a current Working with Children Check (or equivalent clearance applicable in the relevant jurisdiction) and to undergo appropriate screening and suitability assessment before commencing their role. Ongoing suitability is monitored through supervision and periodic review.

Codes of conduct and clear boundaries A Code of Conduct sets clear expectations for all adults interacting with young people. It addresses appropriate physical and emotional boundaries, communication (including digital and online contact), gifts, favouritism, and the responsible use of power and influence. Breaches of the Code are treated as serious matters.

Mandatory reporting and responding to concerns Paws & Connect complies with mandatory reporting obligations under relevant state and territory law. Staff and volunteers are trained to recognise indicators of harm, to respond appropriately to disclosures or concerns, and to follow clear internal reporting pathways. Concerns are escalated promptly, documented carefully, and managed in accordance with both organisational policy and legal requirements.

Supervision and support Staff and volunteers receive regular supervision that includes attention to safeguarding practice, boundary management and the emotional demands of the work. Supervision supports reflective practice and early identification of risk.

Complaints and reporting pathways Accessible, confidential pathways exist for young people, families, staff, volunteers and partners to raise concerns or make complaints. These pathways are communicated clearly and are designed to be safe and non-punitive for those who use them. The Board is informed of serious safeguarding matters in a timely manner.

Online and digital safety Where digital communication forms part of program delivery or support, clear protocols govern contact with young people. These protocols prioritise safety, transparency and appropriate boundaries.

Continuous improvement of safeguarding practice Safeguarding policies and procedures are reviewed regularly. Lessons from incidents, near-misses, complaints and external guidance are used to strengthen practice. The Board receives periodic reporting on safeguarding compliance and culture as part of its oversight role.

Detailed operational procedures for safeguarding sit in supporting policy documents. The governance commitment set out here establishes the organisational standards and accountabilities within which those procedures operate.

5.6. Risk Management

Risk management at Paws & Connect is proactive, proportionate and values-driven. The organisation recognises that carefully matching young people with rescue animals involves inherent complexities. The purpose of risk management is not to eliminate all risk, but to identify, assess, mitigate and monitor risks so that the benefits of reciprocal relationships can be realised as safely as possible.

Key risk domains

- Youth safety and wellbeing (emotional, physical and relational)
- Animal welfare
- Matching and placement compatibility
- Safeguarding and child protection (linked to but distinct from the dedicated safeguarding framework)
- Operational capacity, staff competence and supervision
- Partnership, reputational and stakeholder risk
- Data protection and privacy
- Financial sustainability and governance compliance

Approach to risk

- Risks are identified through the matching process, ongoing reviews, staff supervision, partner feedback, evaluation data and external regulatory requirements.
- A Risk Register is maintained and reviewed regularly by leadership and the Board.
- Mitigation strategies include thorough matching processes, clear support and review protocols, escalation pathways, staff training and supervision, written partnership agreements, appropriate insurance, and compliance with ACNC and child-safety obligations.
- When risks materialise, the immediate priority is the safety and welfare of the young person and the animal. This is followed by careful documentation, learning and system improvement.
- The Board receives regular risk reporting and ensures that residual risks remain within acceptable tolerance given the organisation's purpose, size and stage of development.

Risk management is treated as a continuous organisational discipline. It is informed by the same principles that guide practice: safety first, thoughtful matching, ongoing support, and equal regard for both parties in the relationship.

5.7. Closing Statement

Governance at Paws & Connect exists to create the conditions in which safe, trusting, reciprocal relationships can develop and endure. The Board, ethical framework, animal welfare commitments, safeguarding standards and risk management systems are all designed to protect the integrity of that purpose.

In every decision—whether about strategy, policy, partnership or individual placement—the organisation returns to the same questions that have guided it from the beginning:

Does this decision strengthen trust? Does it protect safety? Does it honour the animal as a partner? Does it support the possibility of belonging and growth for both the young person and the animal?

When governance remains anchored in these questions, and when it meets the standards expected of an Australian charity working with children and young people, Paws & Connect can grow with confidence, knowing that its structures serve the relationships at the heart of its work.