

VYT 2024 Entry #3

Pawsitive Influence: Exploring the link between pet ownership and children's executive functions

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[Start transcript]

Australia has one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world, which contributes to our happiness and health.

I study whether interacting with pets improves children's 'executive functions' – cognitive skills used for planning, problem solving, and decision-making. Caring for pets requires us to use these skills, such as remembering and planning to provide food and water.

We first explored the relationship between executive functions and engagement in household chores versus pet-care chores based on parent reports.

While household chores predicted executive functions, no relationship was found for pet-care chores. This may be because most participants own dogs, and parents are typically the main caregivers for dogs. In contrast, children may be more responsible for fish or small mammals.

We are now conducting focus groups with parents to develop a new scale to compare executive functions across different pet types. Ultimately, this will help us understand whether pet ownership improves responsibility independence and cognitive development in children.

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