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FOSTERING SECURE ATTACHMENT: EXPERIENCES OF ANIMAL COMPANIONS
IN THE FOSTER HOME

ABSTRACT

This study sought to use attachment theory as a lens through which to explore children's relationships with animal companions in the context of long-term foster care. Inductive and deductive thematic analyses of longitudinal case study data from eight children and their foster families suggested (a) that children's relationships with animal companions satisfied attachment-related functions in their own right, and (b) that animal companions also helped to soften perceptions of foster caregivers, facilitating opportunities for the development of closeness. Animals in the foster home may therefore play an important part in helping children to find and develop secure, warm, and loving relationships.

KEY WORDS: Attachment, foster care, animal relationships, family, social work

BACKGROUND

It is well established that a vital source of resilience and wellbeing in children is the presence of a stable, secure, and supportive family relationship (Joseph et al., 2014; Werner & Smith, 1982). One of the cornerstones of the foster care system is the assumption that the provision of a warm, nurturing, stable and secure relationship with a foster caregiver has the capacity to change the developmental course of children who have experienced inadequate early care (Joseph et al., 2014).

From an attachment (Bowlby, 1969, 1973) perspective, the development of a secure attachment relationship with a foster caregiver can be considered a critical element of foster care (Schofield & Beek, 2005). This is because it has been well established that a secure attachment is central to the development of psychological resilience and wellbeing (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988; Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Higgitt, & Target, 1994; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). However, for many foster children, early experiences of neglect, suffering, hurt, separation, and loss can significantly impede the formation of secure attachment relationships with foster caregivers (Schofield & Beek, 2005). The internal working model hypothesis in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982; Bretherton, 1999; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985) suggests that poor early experiences are likely to be internalized, meaning that children bring negative expectations and models of fear, anxiety, and maladaptive defence into new relationships with potential caregivers. This can make it particularly challenging to develop attachment security.

It is important to build a better understanding of how the foster care system might facilitate the development of secure attachment relationships, despite the challenging expectations and resistance children often bring with them (Lee, 2012; Nowacki, & Schoelmerich, 2010). This paper responded to recent calls (e.g., Rockett & Carr, 2014) for

further exploration of the ways in which animals in foster family homes might facilitate this process. There is evidence from the Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) literature (e.g., Parish-Plass, 2008) that animals can lubricate the development of child-adult attachment security, especially when children present with challenging working models of attachment. Exploring this possibility in the context of foster homes might help (a) reinforce the important role that animal attachment can play in applied settings (Joseph et al., 2014), and (b) expand the idea of developing secure attachment bonds with foster caregivers to include wider aspects of the foster family, such as pets.

Animals and attachment theory

One of the central tenets of attachment theory is the notion that early childhood lays the foundation for the development of personality through the lifespan and “. . . that a secure attachment to a caregiver is one of the first and most basic needs” (Beck & Madresh, 2008, p. 43). The theory has developed from Bowlby’s (1969, 1973) contention that the young of species with an extended period of dependence are biologically motivated to establish and maintain selective bonds with discriminate figures in their environment capable of providing care and nurturance into adulthood.

A major benefit of employing attachment theory in the exploration of human-animal bonds is that it has provided researchers with a detailed conceptual base (e.g., Beck & Madresh, 2008; Kurdek, 2008, 2009; Kwong & Bartholomew, 2011; Noonan, 2008; Woodward & Bauer, 2007; Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011a). For example, the theory offers a clear conceptual definition of what is considered a secure attachment relationship. Attachment theorists (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994) have suggested that secure attachment relationships should be (a) dependable sources of comfort (a secure base), (b) sought in times of genuine distress (a safe haven), (c) have their physical presence result in

enjoyment and a sense of safety (proximity maintenance), and (d) have their physical absence illicit a sense of distress (separation distress) (Kurdek, 2008).

In relation to these criteria, researchers (e.g., Beck & Madresh, 2008; Kurdek, 2008, 2009) have sought to provide evidence that humans experience animal relationships as secure attachment bonds. For example, Kurdek (2009) tapped into the extent to which dog caretakers reported feelings that their companion animal was a safe haven (e.g., “When I am feeling bad and need a boost, I turn to my dog to help me feel better”), a secure base (e.g., “I can count on my dog to be there for me”), provoked a desire for proximity maintenance (e.g., “I like having my dog near me”) and separation distress (e.g., “I miss my dog when I am away from him or her”) (Kurdek, 2008). Results suggested that companion animals seemed to satisfy these attachment functions.

In an extension of this study, Kurdek (2009) also compared the extent to which people felt that they turned to their dogs as a safe haven when compared to other key attachment figures, such as mothers, fathers, siblings, best friends, romantic partners, and children. The results suggested that dogs were turned to more significantly than all figures apart from romantic partners and that this was moderated by both human (e.g., being male or widowed made it more likely to rely upon dogs) and animal (e.g., the extent to which animals satisfied their caretakers’ relatedness needs also made it more likely) characteristics. Kurdek, (2009) concluded that the data were evidence that humans can form attachment bonds with animals in a manner that is consistent with the literature on attachment theory and comparable to relationships developed with humans.

Kwong and Bartholomew’s (2011) data explored assistance dogs as attachment figures in a sample of individuals with various disabilities. The study employed thematic methods to analyze semi-structured interviews with participants about their relationships with assistance dogs. Findings suggested that the animals were strong sources of comfort during

distressing times, and the caregivers reported behavior that parallels what Hazan and Zeifman (1994) have described as a safe-haven function, suggesting that “. . . in many cases, the dogs appeared to be so attuned with their owners’ emotions that the owners did not need to seek out the support” (Kwong & Bartholomew, 2011, p. 426). Data also showed that for just over half of the participants, the assistance dogs also fulfilled the role of a secure base. Participants “. . . described how the security and stability provided by their assistance dog provided a foundation for confidence and exploration” (Kwong & Bartholomew, 2011, p. 427). Overall, Kwong and Bartholomew (2011) demonstrated that animals seem to fulfil attachment figure functions. However, they noted that this may be particularly apparent in their investigation because the sample possessed specific characteristics (e.g., a disability requiring animal-related assistance) that increased the likelihood that the human-animal bond might develop into something that reflects an attachment bond.

Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, and Shaver (2012) utilized an interesting and innovative methodology to further support the notion that animals might be capable of fulfilling safe-haven and secure-base functions. Specifically, the researchers primed attachment responses by getting participants to perform distress-eliciting tasks and measuring levels of distress through blood pressure readings. Results suggested that the physical and cognitive presence of companion animals was enough to heighten self-confidence, lower distress, and increase task performance when compared to the total absence of participants’ companion animals. In conclusion, reviews of the literature (e.g., Rockett & Carr, 2014) on human-animal attachment have identified that there is mounting evidence, that for some people, animals seem capable of offering features of a secure attachment relationship.

Human-animal relationships as facilitators of attachment-related changes in foster care

In the context of foster care, there is evidence that the quality of caregiving received prior to a foster care placement (such as early maltreatment or a high number of previous

placements) may have carryover effects that hinder the development of new secure attachment relationships with foster caregivers (Milan & Pinderhughes, 2000; Strijker, Knorth, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2008). There is also some suggestion that these carryover effects are particularly prominent when children have experienced longer periods of abuse or have been taken into care at a later age (Rushton, Mayes, Dance, & Quniton, 2003). Hence, as Joseph et al. (2014) have suggested, there is a need for researchers to explore the ways in which secure attachments with foster caregivers are facilitated, especially in the face of carryover effects that may increase children's resistance to new attachments. To this end, research in the area of animals and attachment offers a number of conceptual possibilities that may have important implications.

Research (Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011b) has identified that the quality of attachment bonds that humans are able to develop in the context of human relationships are not necessarily correlated to the relationships that they develop with animal companions. For example, people with highly insecure working models of attachment in the context of human relationships are not necessarily predisposed to form similar attachments to animals. Such an assertion hints at the possibility that animals may be able to circumvent some of the relational resistance and biases that are carried forward by an insecure working model of attachment (Rockett & Carr, 2014; Zasloff, 1996). Some of the core components of insecure working models of attachment include a generalised, pervasive belief that others are untrustworthy, unreliable, uncaring and emotionally unavailable (Bowlby, 1973). It is possible that animal companions can "evade" these assumptions, simply by not being human, or due to their open, unthreatening capacity to both give and receive love, affection, and positivity. Hence, animal relationships may offer a pathway towards attachment security when human bonds are lacking or significantly challenged.

To this end, Rockett and Carr (2014) discussed the idea that companion animals reflect “transitional beings” (Bridger, 1970) in the context of attachment bond formation. The idea of a transitional being is important in therapeutic contexts because it can facilitate new approaches to old problems and has a special gift for behaving without intention and for listening without speaking. Individuals can also project features of deeply ingrained human-human relationships onto transitional beings, providing insight into relational patterns that are carried forward. In this way, attachment-related dynamics ingrained from human-human interactions can be challenged and reworked in the context of comparatively “safe” relationships with a transitional being.

Animal relationships can also lubricate the construction of new human attachment relationships (Parish-Plass, 2008). For example, in the context of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) animals often facilitate a therapist-client relationship by reworking an individual’s perceptions of the therapist’s actions and intentions on a relational level, based upon observing his/her interactions with an animal (Noonan, 2008). Parish-Plass (2008) has highlighted that children often strongly identify with the animals in an AAT context, meaning that therapists’/caregivers’ interactions with an animal are often “related back to the self” in children’s minds. As such, children are afforded an opportunity to rework or challenge ingrained perceptions of adults and experience more positive models of the other person. Through observation of the ways in which a consistent, supportive human caregiver interacts with an animal, it has been suggested that children are often moved to trust new adults (Noonan, 2008). This has been described as a “softening” of the relational environment (Levinson, 1984) that reduces anxiety around direct human-human interaction for children with attachment-related resistance. Noonan (2008) has suggested that AAT clients invariably put themselves in the position of the animal to interpret the therapist’s likely responses. That is, observing one’s therapist caring for an animal who is expressing a need for affection

allows one to hypothesize with more confidence that the therapist might be capable of offering the same in one's own interaction and to process the cognitions and feelings this arouses. Subsequently, clients are able to work through feelings of being tolerated, rejected, scolded or embraced, were they to be in the animal's position. In time, this can facilitate a working connection (Parish-Plass, 2008, p. 17) with a new adult.

In summary, this paper sought to qualitatively explore children's relationships with animals in the context of foster care using attachment theory as a theoretical lens. Specifically, we were interested in how children experienced their relationships with animals both independently of and in relation to their relationships with foster caregivers. We were also interested in exploring whether ideas about animals as transitional beings, that might serve to lubricate the development of secure attachment relationships with adults, might be fruitful in an applied setting such as foster care. Hence, two key questions guided the investigation: (1) Do children's relationships with animals in foster homes reflect the features of a secure attachment relationship? (2) Do animals in foster homes have the potential to facilitate attachment relationship development between children and foster caregivers and how can this be understood?

METHOD

A qualitative methodology was adopted for the following reasons. Firstly, qualitative methods are particularly well suited (a) to providing new perspectives on old phenomena in order to open up new ways of thinking, and (b) to providing understanding of new phenomena about which little is currently known (Kwong & Bartholemew, 2011). While there is a growing literature base related to animals as attachment figures (see Rockett & Carr, 2014, for a review), little is currently known about their potential to serve as attachment figures in the context of long-term foster care. Furthermore, their potential to facilitate attachment-related development in the context of child-foster caregiver bonds is currently not

well understood. Hence, we reasoned that qualitative methods were well suited to facilitating a richer understanding of the ways in which animals in foster homes are experienced and they would allow us to consider the meaning of these relationships in the context of attachment theory. Given the nature of the investigation, case study was considered appropriate. It is widely accepted (e.g., Rowley, 2002; Stake, 2008; Yin, 1994) that a key strength of case study research is the utilisation of multiple research tools to ascertain a rich, wholesome, intricate understanding of a given phenomenon. The approach is also well suited to the investigation of phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 1994).

Participants

Eight children were identified as suitable cases through liaison with a leading private foster agency in the UK. Children were identified as suitable for the study if the agency considered (a) that they had a history of significant attachment difficulties in foster care to date, (b) that they had experienced a significantly high volume of placement turnovers, (c) that they were currently settling into a new placement (i.e., that had started within the last year), and (d) that the current placement they were settling into also contained a family dog. These sample characteristics helped us to ensure, as far as possible, that the sample were likely to have experienced significant challenges in terms of developing an attachment relationship with foster caregivers and that the presence of a dog was part of the foster family dynamic.

Participants (3 boys & 5 girls) were all living in long-term foster care at the time of the study and were under the legal protection of the agency. Their ages ranged from 10-16 years and all were literate and able to communicate verbally (all were of Caucasian descent with English as their primary language). All participants were educated in mainstream schools in the UK and most (7 of 8) attended regular contact meetings with biological

parents. Foster carers were all of Caucasian descent, spoke English as their first or only language and self-identified as “working class.” During the period of study, three of the children moved schools (although their foster placement remained the same) and three were forced to cease contact with their biological parents due to inconsistent attendance at meetings. Aside from this, all living, schooling and contact arrangements remained consistent throughout the seven-month longitudinal investigation. Participants were all living in homes where dogs were present. All homes had one dog and several homes had other animals too, including cats, parrots, hamsters, rabbits and fish. Table 1 provides a detailed description of each participant based upon agency case notes and interviews with foster families and case workers.

Data Collection and Procedures

Initially, written consent was obtained from the foster agency and from foster families themselves. Subsequently, children were visited by a familiar social worker who, together with foster caregivers, explained the nature of the research project to them. After giving their consent, participants were then introduced to a researcher who conducted an informal familiarisation interview with them, where they talked generally about the people and animals that formed part of their current foster family and learned more about the aims of the study.

One of our key objectives was to discuss with children the attachment related features of the relationships they shared with both foster caregivers and animals in their foster home. In order to facilitate these discussions an initial semi-structured interview (during the first month of the study) with each child was conducted in their current foster family home without the presence of foster caregivers. These interviews were guided by the attachment literature and enabled children to discuss, explain, and explore key features of the relationships they felt they shared with their foster caregivers and animal companions. The key constructs of Hazan and

Zeifman's (1994) features of a secure attachment relationship (i.e., viewing the other as a secure base and/or safe haven, desiring proximity maintenance, and experiencing separation anxiety or distress) were used to guide the conversation. Children had the opportunity to discuss their relationships with both foster caregivers and companion animals in relation to each of these relational features. As part of this interview, rather than simply discussing each relationship in isolation, participants were also asked to think about their relationships in relation to each other, to facilitate a sense of relativity and help them compare, contrast, and explore the extent to which they felt that each relationship was characterised by a specific attachment-related feature. We did not ask children to numerically rate any of the constructs under discussion but a 10cm line upon which they could place representative faces of caregivers and animals was provided as each construct was discussed and children would place the relationship referents on the line, moving them up and down as they thought about, considered, and explored each relationship in relation to the dimension. Rowe and Carnelley (2005) have argued that such diagrammatic representations can help to elicit qualitatively different information during attachment-related interviews because people can relate different relationship referents to each other and this can invoke helpful thoughts and feelings.

To further understand and 'capture' the ways in which children's relationships with foster caregivers and animals developed and unfolded, children were also asked to maintain a guided diary for a six-month period. Weekly diaries completed by participants recorded what they perceived to be prominent events in their lives and their subsequent thoughts and feelings about these events. The diaries were semi-structured and guided participants to think about the events in relation to how they made them feel, who they wanted/did not want to share the event with, whether they felt sad, happy, ashamed, or angry, whether they sought comfort from another, who they sought comfort with, how it played out, and how they felt about it. At the end of the initial interview, the researcher explained the requirements for the diaries to each of

the children and left them with the diary and necessary information/knowledge to ask for help if they needed it. Weekly contact was made with each of the foster caregivers to ask how children were progressing with their diaries and to help with any concerns or issues that arose.

At the end of the study, after six months, a researcher again visited each child in their home and conducted a second semi-structured interview, similar to the initial interview described above (with particular reference to how things might have changed over time) but also discussing in more depth the diaries children had kept and the specific issues raised in them. Following these final interviews, foster carers were also interviewed in relation to how they felt about children's observable relationships with them and with the animals in the foster home. These interviews sought to triangulate and further explore concepts related to attachment behaviours and relationships in the children. The interviews also sought further clarification on issues raised through the diaries over the course of the six-month data collection period.

Analysis and interpretation of data

Analysis of the data began with a complete transcription of all interviews and diary extracts. Data were interpreted in terms of the information they provided about our two main research questions: (1) whether children's relationships with animals reflected features of a secure attachment relationship, and (2) whether and how animals facilitated attachment relationships between children and foster caregivers. We adopted a hybrid approach that incorporated both deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Deductive analysis was employed to determine whether key features of attachment relationships (we defined codes in accordance with attachment theory, looking for evidence of safe haven, secure base, and separation anxiety) seemed to be present in children's relationships with animals. We then examined the data in detail to identify passages that appeared to be consistent with these themes. An inductive method was used to address the second, more exploratory question (and

any subthemes that we felt emerged under the theoretical themes outlined as part of the first question). Passages of text and quotes that were relevant to a given theme or issue were identified and conceptually organised into meaningful themes.

For clarity, paralinguistic (e.g. umms and errs) was edited in situations where it did not contribute to the “tone” or “meaning” of the text. As Stevens and Andersen (2007) have suggested, the use of audio-taped recordings of interviews allows researchers to enhance the trustworthiness of their data simply because questions, answers, and ambiguities remain available throughout the process of analysis. To ensure that our data were interpreted judiciously, a third member of staff (in addition to the authors) with an intimate knowledge of attachment theory checked the validity and feasibility of the data interpretations against the original transcripts and recorded interviews so that consensus was reached three ways.

Sparkes (2002, p. 199) has outlined that, “*any* kind of research can be dismissed, trashed, and trivialized if inappropriate criteria are imposed on it”. Readers are requested to judge the legitimacy and quality of the dialogues and interpretations made in accordance with whether or not they shed light on the aims of the paper.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the authors’ institutional ethics committee and the foster agency, foster families, and children provided both verbal and written consent. The foster agency’s “psychology team” and “head of children’s services” were also satisfied with the aims, motivations, and proposed methodology of the project and that the welfare of the animals involved was respected. Participants are protected by confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms throughout. Only the authors are aware of their identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Suspicion, mistrust, and projection

A key theme (arising in 7 of 8 cases) was that foster caregivers were frequently viewed with suspicion by the children. There were strong feelings around the idea that caregivers were somehow colluding with a world that children had come to experience as threatening and potentially painful. We felt that this theme was a clear reflection of children's proneness to resist trusting new adult relationships and frequently to project fears and anxieties onto them (e.g., Lee, 2012; Nowacki, & Schoelmerich, 2010). For example, Jake explained that:

"I can still find it hard being really close with Trudi [foster caregiver] cos everyone in the past has been horrible to me and eventually everyone has got rid of me, and I guess there's still a chance that Trudi might do that, so I don't feel totally safe with her. I mean, I would if I were like adopted or something but I'm still in foster care which is why the social worker comes around and checks on me, cos they like, own me or something like that. Nobody wants to adopt me so I can live there all the time without having to move to new homes...I don't mind being really close with Zak [dog] cos he won't get rid of me, so I feel really safe with him. I think that he's my friend because he wants to be and not just because he has to be." (Jake)

Jodie expressed strong feelings of anger, suspicion, and alienation when her meetings with her biological mother were terminated (her mother frequently failed to attend) during the course of the study. Many of these feelings were projected onto her foster caregiver, making it difficult for her to trust and establish a connection with her:

"...she [foster caregiver] told me I can't see my mum again. I am dead mad about it and she won't let me go and see her at contact any more. I think it's dead cruel and she knows it makes me angry - so I put her right down here [indicates graphically that she clearly does not view her foster caregiver as a safe haven or source of security] and now *she* only gets more angry, with *me*" (Jodie)

"I hate it! Hate it! Why can't I see Mummy?! It's not fair. She won't take me anymore!" (Jodie's diary)

It was particularly interesting to note that animal companions frequently slipped under the radar of the mistrust and suspicion children felt towards their foster caregivers. As Jake noted in the quote above, he didn't feel implicitly threatened by being close to Zak (the dog) because

“he won’t get rid of me, so I feel really safe with him. I think that he’s my friend because he wants to be and not just because he has to be.” In the midst of Jodie’s powerful emotional responses to losing contact with her mother, she found Storm (the dog) to be a relationship she could trust. Her foster caregiver recalled the moment she broke the news about ceasing contact with her mother:

“She didn’t look shocked. She just shrugged her shoulders and kept colouring in. Then she stopped and asked why, but I don’t think she was listening. She looked real empty, like her eyes went hollow. She was really angry and I could see her sitting there shaking. She definitely blamed me. She just wouldn’t let me in though. She just went and sat with Storm [the dog] for hours and hours. She would get upset and come crying to me but whenever we tried to talk about it the anger would come back again” (interview with Jodie’s foster caregiver)

Animals as a safe haven

Previous attachment-related research has suggested that animal companions are able to satisfy the need for comfort, reassurance, assistance and protection in times of danger or distress (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2012). Data suggested that the children in this study frequently (7 of 8 cases) turned to animals as safe havens. In accordance with previous research (e.g., Kwong & Bartholemew, 2011) there was a suggestion that *contact comfort* (skin-to-skin physical contact) was a significant part of this process:

“I like spending time with him [the dog] and I used to hide in the living room with him when there was a knock at the door. I used to worry it was the social worker coming to take me away. I didn’t feel safe without him and when I was with him, just holding his ears, I felt relaxed and I wouldn’t have the big thumping in my body” (Evan).

“He [the dog] was the only person that would stop me from feeling worried at night. I didn’t like being alone at night in my room. I felt embarrassed crying in front of Sheila [foster caregiver] but I could cry and feel safe with the dog on my bed. When I cry he wriggles into my neck and I rest my face against his belly. Then I cry more, but I feel better after I cry. Like the tears help get the worry out my head. I feel safe with him there beside me. Like he wants to help me and stop my bad thoughts” (Jane).

“When they found out at school that she [foster caregiver] isn’t my mum and I don’t actually have a mum I wanted to run away and come back to be here with him [the dog]. When I am with him I feel better and happy again.” (Evan)

Children (7 of 8 children) also felt that they often *preferred* their animal companions as a safe haven, over and above their foster caregivers or other human relationships. This was frequently attributed to the fact that the animals did not require them to verbally communicate feelings they did not feel able or want to express. For example, as Jake explained:

“When I feel sad I go to him [the dog] but I do go to her [foster caregiver] more now. It’s just I find it easier going to him [the dog] because I don’t have to talk about stuff as much, I can just think about it and he makes me feel really calm and he empties my head of stuff when I get confused and worried. I go and sit with him and then everything slows down and I like that. I can’t do it with people because they’re always waiting for you to say something or waiting to say something to you. I like that he [the dog] is more easy than that.” (Jake)

“When she [foster caregiver] asks me what’s wrong it’s hard cos I can’t like explain it and stuff. I don’t know how to explain what I’m thinking about and feeling. That’s why I don’t really talk to anyone. I just like to lay with him [the dog] when I am confused and feeling funny” (Pete)

Previous studies (e.g., Kwong & Bartholomew, 2011) in the context of attachment theory have suggested that people often report high levels of emotional attunement with their animal companions, to the extent that they often feel that they don’t have to “seek animals out” during distressing episodes because the animal “comes to them” first. Children alluded to this on a number of occasions:

“He [the dog] comes to find me and when I am feeling a bit worried it’s like he can tell because he is really gentle and he wants to cuddle up to me and stuff like that because he makes me feel much better and...he stops me worrying” (Jake).

“If I’m sad she [the dog] follows me round. I like getting back [from school] and being with her if people have...say...said mean things. I feel much better when I am with her.” (May)

Animals as a secure base

Kwong and Bartholomew (2011) have suggested that it can be difficult to distinguish between secure-base and safe-haven features of human-animal attachment relationships. They argued that safe haven and secure base features sometimes coincide because “felt security” (i.e., a secure base) clearly develops from having a reliable source of comfort (i.e., a safe haven). In the current study, children were able to identify evidence of secure-base features in

their relationships with companion animals, although perhaps not as readily as they could identify examples of a safe-haven. Nonetheless, there was evidence (in 5 of 8 cases) that children viewed their animals as a secure base from which to gain a sense of confidence in the world around them.

“I do feel more confident when he [the dog] is around, like when people ask me what I think about stuff and when talking to people I feel better if he [the dog] is just “around,” but I don’t need him all the time - just when it’s difficult.” (Katie)

“When school is bad or I’m away from home I do think about him [the dog] and where we can walk that evening. I like that I can always go back to him and he’s the first to say hello. I feel more confident knowing he is around and will be there when I get home cos if it’s a good one or a bad day he still wants to see me.” (Pete)

The notion of a secure base was also evident in the things children did with their animal companions. For example, Katie spoke about feeling more confident to go for walks “alone:” “I feel much more confident with him [the dog] and like I can do a lot more. I don’t know why but I don’t worry so much and I take him when I go to the shops because I can go on my own and I know that he’ll be there with me.”

Separation distress

In the context of attachment theory, it is important to understand that the direction of the concern generated by separation anxiety is an indicator of the nature of the attachment relationship. For example, Kwong and Bartholomew (2011) noted that many participants in their study of human bonds with assistance dogs indicated that separation anxiety in relation to the animals was most significantly linked to concerns for animals’ welfare during the separation (indicative of a care-giving bond as opposed to an attachment bond). As Kwong and Bartholomew (2011) noted, “within an attachment relationship, separation anxiety serves to maintain proximity [to the attachment figure] for protection and safety. Therefore, the focus of concern would be on one’s own well-being” (p.428). In the current study participants felt

anxiety during separation with animal companions due to the negative impact upon their own emotional regulation.

While on holiday with her foster caregiver and dog, Jane's dog was required to sleep in the car, away from the building in which the family were staying. Jane noted, "I was worried because he wasn't in the house. He usually sleeps beside my door and I didn't like sleeping in a strange place and not having him there too. I was worried because he wasn't in the same place as me when I went to sleep." Her foster caregiver also explained that Jane "was always within eye sight of him [the dog] and when she wasn't she was wondering where he was, and I mean *all the time.*"

Trudi (Jake's foster caregiver) explained how "he [Jake] would obviously let go of a lot of tension" the moment she picked him up from school and that he "didn't appear to put up too much protest when we dropped him off but as soon as we collected him he would ask about the dog, check that he was OK, that he was still at home, and check what I had been doing all day, and then he would come in and rush upstairs to check his stuff was still in his room and that it hadn't been packed away for him."

Animals as a bridge

In their exposition of a secure-base parenting model for foster care, Schofield and Beek (2009) highlighted the critical importance of a secure base in foster caregiver relationships. However, they simultaneously acknowledged that the development of a secure base can be extremely hard work for foster families because of the challenging expectations and models of relationships that children frequently bring with them. They noted that in order to facilitate the development of a secure base with foster children, foster caregivers must try to ensure that they initially "feel" friendly, caring, and approachable to children and that they offer them "safe," non-threatening interactions as much as possible. To this end, the animal companions in the

current study frequently seemed to offer children a bridge via which they could begin to experience and believe in their foster caregivers as “caring others.” For example, Jake’s diary indicated that he had come to view his foster caregiver as caring and trustworthy based upon his observations of her interactions with the family dog:

“Trudi [foster caregiver] was a nice person who wasn’t being fake. She took real good care of Zak [the dog] all the time and never got angry or fed up. She was really nice to him and always made sure that he was ok. I like Zak so much. He is really nice and wants to spend time with me. I think I was wrong about Trudi because actually she seems nice too. Zak must love her and I know he wouldn’t do that if Trudi wasn’t really nice” (Jake’s diary)

Similarly, Evan also suggested that how his foster caregiver treated the family dog played a role in shaping and constructing his expectations of her as a caregiver:

“It was like she [foster caregiver] was a person I could trust and she would take care of me too. Like, Socks [the dog] hasn’t got a Mum or a Dad either and Rose [foster caregiver] looks after us both the same. She is a nice person because she is always really nice to Socks and does lots of things for him” (Evan)

“I heard her [foster caregiver] talking to him [the dog] about things about me. I heard her telling him to be nice to me and not to feel jealous because she still loved him. She said that I seemed really nice and that she wanted to get to know me. I sat on the stairs and listened and watched her through the rails. It made me feel funny in my tummy when she said those nice things, and when I saw that she was talking to the dog I liked it so I started talking to him too.” (Evan)

Pete and his caregiver also alluded to something similar:

“She [foster caregiver] was always nice to him [the dog], so I knew that she’d be nice to me too. Even when he’s bad, like barking or biting things, she doesn’t hate him, or get rid of him. I liked her because she was dead kind to him all the time. After, when I liked the dog, that’s when I liked her [foster caregiver]” (Pete)

“I felt judged. He was like a shadow for the dog. When I was with the dog he watched my every move...with eagle eyes.” (Pete’s foster caregiver)

Bridger (1970) discussed the way in which animals can often serve as “transitional beings” that help soothe and divert anxieties within human-human relationships until a trusted rapport has been established. This seemed to be the case in the context of the foster families in the current study (this is not to say that animals functioned *only* as transitional beings).

CONCLUSION

The current study supported the contention that children's relationships with animal companions in the context of long-term foster care can and do reflect some of the primary features of an attachment bond (i.e., safe haven, secure base, and separation anxiety). The majority of children reported experiencing their animal companions as available, reassuring, and comforting during times of distress. Furthermore, similar to human relationships they often felt that their animal companions provided them with a sense of security, confidence, and a general sense that they were being cared about and looked after in a context that many experienced as extremely threatening. There was also some evidence that separation from animal companions provoked a sense of anxiety in some children that seemed to be linked to feeling less safe in the animal's absence.

All of the animal companions in the current study were dogs. Morey (2010) has speculated that dogs have been selectively bred for thousands of years because of their very capacity to connect with human beings and to engage in mutually responsive relationships with them. As such, it is plausible that animals such as dogs have a powerful capacity to trigger and respond to attachment-related systems in human beings (Kwong & Bartholomew, 2011). These findings lend support to this contention and to an expanding literature base (e.g., Kwong & Bartholomew, 2011; Rockett & Carr, 2014; Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011) suggesting that relationships with animals satisfy attachment functions for humans. The current study is particularly interesting in the sense that it extends ideas about human-animal attachment into an applied context where it may have particularly important implications. Children frequently face significant challenges developing secure attachment bonds in foster homes, due to carryover effects that can increase their resistance to and trust in new relationships (Milan & Pinderhughes, 2000; Schofield & Beek, 2008; Strijker, Knorth, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2008).

Animal relationships hold significant potential to circumvent such relational challenges, helping children to experience a sense of safety and security in foster homes.

Furthermore, data also identified that animals were not only experienced as attachment relationships in their own right but also had the capacity to strengthen, reinforce, and lubricate the development of relational closeness between children and their foster caregivers. Winnicott (1953/1986) and Bridger (1970) discussed the importance of “transitional objects/beings” in therapeutic contexts as providing a safe-haven to hold on to and divert anxieties, while clients work through and face the challenges and threats posed by human relationships. Furthermore, Parish-Plass (2008) has highlighted the incredibly important therapeutic function that caregiver interactions with animal companions can have in AAT, as children simply observe these interactions and relate them back to the self in their minds. There was evidence in the current study that this can be a particularly important aspect of the presence of animal companions in foster homes and that it can “soften” the idea of closeness with foster caregivers in children’s minds.

There are, of course, many further questions to be answered and some limitations and caveats to acknowledge and address in future research. Firstly, practitioners are beginning to acknowledge and tap into the potential therapeutic benefits of dogs in the context of long-term foster care. In a recent *Good Practice Guide* relating specifically to *Dogs and Pets in Fostering and Adoption* (Adams, 2015) the *British Association of Adoption and Fostering* recognises that wider features of the fostering environment such as pets can be important parts of the foster system. However, the guide also raises important practical issues for families to consider such as the potential relevance of factors such as dog breed, child and dog “matching” and/or compatibility, and safety and ethical treatment of dogs and children in foster homes. It is important to note that each of these issues requires careful consideration before policy in relation to dogs in the context of foster care can be further developed. Secondly, while the

current study provided qualitative evidence that dogs in the context of foster homes have the capacity to satisfy features of attachment relationships and to facilitate such bonds between children and caregivers, there is a need for larger scale research that utilises more objective measures of attachment to verify the attachment-related issues we raised. Such studies would help to further corroborate some of the processes at which our data hinted and could help to establish how these processes unfold longitudinally.

It would be foolish to suggest that *all* foster homes ought to incorporate animal companions as part and parcel of the fostering process. Clearly, the processes highlighted in this study are likely to be dependent upon a number of complex factors that need to be carefully considered. Some children are scared of dogs, not all children are likely to respond positively to dogs, some children may have a history of abuse towards animals, and not all caregivers relate to their animals in the same way. It was not the purpose of our study to suggest that animals in the foster home can provide a one-size-fits-all solution to the challenges of long-term foster care. Rather, we sought to highlight the potential that animals can hold in relation to helping children experience the benefits associated with warm, secure, safe, and nurturing relationships in foster care.

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Table 1. Details of case study sample ($n=8$)

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Length of time in foster care	Time in current placement	Number of foster placements to date	Important details	Current foster family make up
Katie	F	13	6 years	11 months	9	Taken into care due to abuse and neglect from biological mother. Reported to be “quiet,” “isolated,” and lacking confidence in current foster home.	Foster mother, foster father and family dog
Leah	F	16	7 years	11 months	10	Severely abused by biological parents. Experiences violent anger outbursts (the reason for many placement terminations). Being treated for self-harm in a child mental health unit.	Foster mother and family dog and cat
Jodie	F	11	8 years	13 months	7	Taken into care due to neglect at age 3. Still has scheduled monthly contact with birth parents. This monthly arrangement is frequently broken by her birth parents (a significant source of upset for her).	Foster mother and family dog.

Pete	M	10	5 years	7 months	6	Taken into care due to neglect. Maintains contact with biological parents but they frequently miss meetings. Experiences significant distress over the fact that his biological parents have since had another child who has not been taken into care. Prone to violent outbursts.	Foster mother and family dog
May	F	10	5 years	9 months	7	Taken into care due to neglect. Prone to violent and aggressive outbursts, particularly when contact with biological parents is missed (she is often inconsolable when this happens).	Foster mother and family dog
Evan	M	11	4 years	10 months	9	Taken into care due to the death of his mother in a road accident. Described as “extremely reserved” since his arrival in care.	Foster mother and family dog
Jake	M	10	4 years	12 months	7	Taken into care due to abuse from his biological mother. Suffers from severe anxiety in relation to placement moves and frequently “checks”	Foster mother and family dog

Jane	F	11	6 years	11 months	9	that his belongings have not been packed.	
						Taken into care due to abuse and neglect. Maintains contact with her biological mother but her mother frequently misses these meetings. She becomes distressed when she “doesn’t know where everybody is” and frequently “checks” on carers for this reason.	Foster mother and family dog

NB: Information provided is derived from case notes provided by the foster agency and from basic demographic interview data provided by foster families and social workers.