

2008

A parental perspective: The role of companion animals for children during separation and divorce

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A Parental Perspective: The Role of Companion Animals for Children During Separation and
Divorce

Jessica Michel

A report submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor of
Arts (Psychology) Honours, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science,

Edith Cowan University

Submitted (October, 2008)

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank the participants, for sharing their time, experiences and stories with me.

To Ms Davina Goldthorpe and the Joondalup Family Relationship Centre, thank you for your assistance in the recruitment of participants.

I would like to also thank my supervisors, Dr Elizabeth Kaczmarek and Dr Deirdre Drake for their guidance and expertise throughout the year.

To Ms Carole Gambsy and Dr Justine Dandy, thank you for always being available.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for always being there and helping me through this year.

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Companion Animals as Social Support for Children During Divorce: A Parental Perspective

Jessica Michel

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Arts Honours, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science

Edith Cowan University

August, 2008

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Abstract

Children grow up in interdependent family systems, where transitions affect all members. A prevalent transition in Australian families is divorce. When divorce occurs children are exposed to significant risk factors that have the potential of affecting many developmental outcomes. However, certain protective factors may reduce the impact of life stressors and a pivotal protective factor is social support. Companion animals have been recognised as beneficial to adults and children alike for many years, however, recent research has highlighted the fact that pets may also serve as sources of social support. The current paper will review relevant literature to determine the benefit pets may have on children during parental separation and divorce. The review will end with a brief mention of current limitations and future areas of research.

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August 2008

Companion Animals as Social Support for Children During Divorce: A Parental Perspective

Introduction

Divorce has been found to be a stressful and often painful life transition for all parties involved, regardless of whether they are adults, adolescents or children (Short, 2002; Wu & Schimmele, 2007). Numerous researchers have also argued that the effects of divorce on children tend to have long lasting consequences that may still be evident to varying degrees in adolescence and adulthood (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995). Short stated that individuals who have experienced parental divorce during childhood may experience more life stress and family conflict, as well as use inadequate coping styles in their early adulthood. Similar long term effects were found by Amato and Sobolewski's (2001) longitudinal data, which revealed that those participants who had experienced divorce when they were children had lower levels of psychological well-being in adulthood.

There is evidence to suggest that divorce may have negative effects on children, and the literature has reported that certain protective factors may lessen the negative impact of parental separation or divorce (Wolchik, Wilcox, Tein, & Sandler, 2000). These may be referred to as "shock absorbers" (Amato, 2000) and these factors, which include social skills, coping skills, self-efficacy, social support and community services, are said to reduce the strength of the link between the stressor and the person's reaction to that stressor. One such factor that is said to reduce the negative impact of parental divorce is social support (Bryant, 1985a). Researchers such as Bryant have found that when social support is available to children, even when they are exposed to stressful household environments and experiences, for example, a household going through spousal separation, they tend to have fewer behavioural problems. This would suggest that social support may offer children some degree of protection against potentially detrimental life events. Walker, MacBride and Vachon (1977) identified four different forms of support: maintenance of social identity; emotional

support, which included feeling as if one was understood and cared for; material aid and services; and information. The researchers stated that sources of support could be people, places or activities, hence consistent with this definition social support would be described as support from any being who caused an individual to feel understood and cared for (Bryant, 1985b).

It has been assumed for many years that emotional and social support would naturally originate from other human beings, however the role of companion animals in this context has received little attention from researchers (Melson, 2003). Considering that pets are often seen as family members and common play mates for children (Barker, 1999), Melson suggested that pets could be considered a significant part of children's lives by the children themselves and could be a potential source of social support. The author highlighted the need for further research in relation to the role companion animals play in children's lives. The present paper will review the literature to determine how children who experience parental divorce or separation may be affected by the presence of a companion animal. The review will look at the role of families in regards to child development as well as divorce and its effect, in particular, on children. It will also discuss social support as a protective factor for children. The review will then examine the role of pets in families and will focus on the role they may play in the lives of children. The current paper will conclude with a brief critique of the current literature in this area.

Family

The need for attachment is fundamental for the survival of human species and this need for relatedness remains present in the individual throughout his or her life, although it has been documented to vary as the individual moves through various stages of development (Bryant, 1985a). Some researchers, such as Bryant (1985a), argue that stress and the appropriate social support may be imperative for the social-emotional development of

individuals. Such researchers cite theories such as Erikson's (1959) stages of psychosocial development in which it was proposed that individuals must resolve a series of crises at certain times in their lifetimes. These events were said to cause the individual stress until they were resolved (Erikson, 1959). Erikson proposed that these crises span throughout the individual's life and the resolution of these would determine how the individual viewed himself or herself and how he or she related to the social world in which he or she operated (Sorell & Montgomery, 2001). When referring to children, their immediate family is recognised as the most important social environment and the place where they gain the most social support and hence, much of the early socio-emotional development for children occurs within the context of the family and its members (Hill, 1986).

Family development theory defines a family as an organization and environment that facilitates the growth and development of its members; the theory breaks the life cycle of a family into several stages as described by Hill (1986). Hill stated that the family development theory considers a family an interdependent system. That is, all the members of a given family are reliant on one another and hence a change in the role of one member causes changes in all the other roles. Movement is said to occur as a family grows and moves from one stage to another (Hill, 1986). According to this perspective, events such as divorce are not single events but rather, part of a series of changes in the organisation and functioning of the family (Hetherington, Clingempeel, Anderson, Deal, Hagan, Hollier, et al., 1992). As the family changes, for example in the case when children are born, the family and its members will experience stress until the system adjusts to the new situation (Hetherington et al., 1992). When additional transitions occur, for example divorce, it is said that this will cause further stress (Hill, 1986). The interdependency of the environment surrounding children has been discussed and highlighted by other theoretical frameworks as well.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, in regards to child development, stresses the importance of the environment surrounding the child and its interrelationships (Melson, 2003). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), children do not grow up as isolated agents in their own private worlds but rather, they are influenced by direct and indirect factors. Bronfenbrenner highlights the influence of others, in particular important individuals to the child such as parents and school teachers, when considering child development. That is, Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework sees children developing and growing up within the context of significant relationships and hence provides a basis for claims that social factors are important when considering the well-being of children. However, even though there is ample evidence available that indicates that social support is pivotal in child development, researchers have failed to examine thoroughly the types of social support that are of most benefit when children experience adverse life events such as parental separation or divorce.

Divorce

Most researchers agree that divorce is a stressful event in the life of a family (Amato, 2000). Divorce rates, in Australia as in many other western nations, have increased over the last few decades, with 1 in 3 Australian marriages ending in divorce during the 2000 to 2003 period as indicated by census data (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007). The literature frequently states that divorce is a stressful event for all those involved but children tend to be particularly vulnerable during this time according to researchers (Short, 2002). Despite what is popularly assumed, divorce is not a single event represented by the couple living apart or legally dissolving their marriage; it is a series of transitions that modify the lives of all parties involved regardless of whether they are adults, children or companion animals living in the family (Hetherington et al., 1989).

Although the transition of divorce is likely to affect the development of children regardless of their age, Hetherington et al. (1989) stated that most children can be expected to

adapt to the new situation caused by the dissolution of their parents' union, within two to three years of the event taking place so long as no other negative events occur within this time period. However, if additional negative events do occur, then the time until the child adapts to the divorce is likely to be prolonged as the stressors will be confounded (Hetherington et al., 1989). Children are likely to see parental divorce as an unexpected event and this is particularly true when the separation is not preceded by a high level of parental conflict (Amato, 2001). Amato (2001) discussed that children often associate divorce with a number of stressful transitions, such as a decrease in the income of the household as well as losing contact with one parent. There is some evidence suggesting that when there is a high level of parental conflict in a home and divorce occurs, children tend to benefit instead of being negatively affected because the child is removed from a less than ideal environment (Hetherington et al., 1989). However, when families that have had low levels of parental discord separate, the children tend to find the separation especially distressing and these instances are more likely to be associated with poorer long-term adjustment and well-being for the children (Hanson, 1999).

Divorce and Children

Commonly, children will experience behavioural disruptions and emotional upheaval following divorce or parental separation, and this may be externalised in a number of ways, as has been described by Hetherington et al. (1989). Children who experience parental divorce often feel helplessness and powerlessness and these feelings, unless they are dealt with, may lead to further symptoms such as depression and lowered self-esteem (Kalter, Alpern, Spence, & Plunkett, 1984). DeLucia-Waack and Gellman (2007), in relation to the effects divorce may have on children, stated that children whose parents divorce tend to feel isolated as well as disconnected from others and they receive less validation and support than children who have not experienced divorce. In addition, children, particularly those under the age of six, tend to

experience considerable emotional distress and adjustment problems immediately following parental separation or divorce as well as feel considerable anxiety about abandonment (Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little, 2003).

Amato and Keith (1991) conducted a meta-analysis on 92 studies that dealt with children and divorce. Their aim was to examine the empirical evidence available to determine if indeed children who experienced parental divorce were consistently at a disadvantage in their development when compared to children from intact families. Children from intact families were assumed to be developing within the normal ranges of child development and therefore it was assumed they had average scores on developmental outcomes. The analysis of the literature found a consistent pattern in the results and statements made by the numerous researchers whose studies were included. That is, the literature included in this meta-analysis consistently highlighted that children who experienced parental divorce, when compared to children from intact families, tended to have lower levels of well-being in relation to academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-esteem, social competence and their relationship with their parents with the median effect size .14 of a standard deviation. The findings of Amato and Keith's meta-analysis were also reached by Short (2002). Short stated that there is a strong trend evident in the literature that investigates the impact of divorce on children. This trend suggests that most researchers in this field agree that children who experience divorce are at an increased risk for a number of problems when compared to children from intact families and thus, demonstrates that divorce has a very high potential to negatively impact children's well-being.

Although the divorce literature reports common effects of this phenomenon on children, it also highlights that the effects are dependent on a number of factors (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001). Some of the factors discussed by Furstenberg and Kiernan include pre and post-divorce circumstances, such as the level of marital discord; and the age and

developmental stage of the child. In addition some research indicates that younger children are affected more and that children with easy temperaments tend to fare better (Fusternberg & Kiernan, 2001). In addition the way the parents handle the process also affects children's adjustment (Fusternberg & Kiernan, 2001). All these factors and their interaction are said to be important in determining the extent to which the child will be negatively affected by the divorce. Other factors to be aware of that are of critical importance when considering the long-term adjustment of any child to divorce are the pattern and timing of the experiences associated with this event (Hetherington, et al., 1989). For example, the researchers discussed that young children, in particular preschoolers, are likely to be less able to appraise the divorce situation accurately and consequently these children are more likely to blame themselves and struggle to understand the situation. Older children may be better able to accurately appraise the situation and be more equipped to cope with additional stresses, such as moving schools and neighbourhoods. Older children are also better able to take advantage of external support systems, support systems being an important protective factor as will be later discussed. Regardless of the age of the child and the events surrounding the dissolution of a marriage, children will be affected by the termination of their parents' union.

There are a number of perspectives as to why divorce has the high risk of negatively impacting children (Amato, 2000). For example, some researchers believe a two parent family is the foundation of any well-functioning society and children who grow up in such an environment develop into healthy, competent and productive citizens, conversely when this institution breaks down, it is said to lead to social problems such as poverty, violence, teen pregnancy and substance abuse (Amato, 2000). However this perspective is considered archaic and other plausible explanations including the high levels of parental conflict that can be associated with divorcing couples; a decrease in the quality of parental functioning after divorce; social deficits associated with growing up in a single parent home; as well as a

decrease in the economic well-being of the family have been suggested (Amato and Keith, 1991). Chase-Lansdale et al. (1995) proposed that certain protective factors could lessen the impact developmental risks such as divorce can have on children.

Social Support as a Protective Factor

Protective factors are said to reduce the relationship between a risk factor and its effect on the individual (Carothers, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2006). Protective factors range from personal attributes such as self-esteem and problem solving skills to external factors such as affection bonds with family members (Carothers et al., 2006). Research studies have found social support as one of the pivotal protective factor for adults and children alike (Larsen & Birmingham, 2003). Social support is said to have a buffering effect against stress, with individuals who have high levels of social support being buffered against stressful life events (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002).

Social support has been described as a source of emotional assistance and emotional resources in times of need as well as a source of feedback (Anderson, Wozencroft, & Bedini, 2008). Researchers such as DuBois, Felner, Brand, Adan, & Evans (1992) have linked social support to reduced levels of psychological distress in times of adverse life events while Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser (1996) have stated that social support has the potential of benefiting health in general. Dubow and Tisak (1989) proposed social support to be composed of at least three aspects: the belief one's social environment is helpful; actual supportive behaviours performed by the social network; and being able to identify with one's social network. However, not all three elements need to be present at all times for support to be deemed social support.

Social support, according to Carothers et al. (2006) has the potential of influencing a child's interpretation of stressful events and his or her emotional response to these events. This is because social support provides the child with someone to talk to and discuss his or

her feelings and thoughts (Carothers, et al., 2006). Larsen and Birmingham (2003) stated that the most important factor for a child's successful adaptation when faced with adverse life events is at least one caring adult with whom the child can spend time with and talk.

Furthermore, Hetherington et al. (1989), in their research, described social support systems as one of the five most important factors in predicting long-term adjustment for children who had experienced parental divorce. For children, the three major sources of social support, according to DeGarmo and Martinez (2006) are their family; formal institutions such as schools and child care centres; and their peers or other adults, for example neighbours or family friends. Family ties and in particular strong, secure attachments to caregivers are said to be the most critical protective factor for children (Carothers et al., 2006).

Lee, Detels, Rotheram-Borus, and Duan (2007) found that among adolescents aged between 11 and 18, those who emotionally best dealt with the stress of having a parent with HIV/AIDS were those youth who had greater social support. The researcher found youth with poor peer or family support networks displayed higher levels of depression. However, the study was not initially designed to research social support at such but rather the role of coping skills in emotional functioning when faced with stressful situations. Even so, the researchers found a link between social support and a reduced effect of risk factors which has been found by other researchers also.

Dubow and Tisak (1989) studied the role of social support and social problem solving skills had on lessening the impact of stressful events on 361 school-aged children. The children were asked to rate their perceived level of social support; the parents were to describe the level of stress in the child's environment and his or her behavioural adjustment; while the school teachers were asked to rate the child's behaviour and academic adjustment. This study included a measure that had not been included in previous studies, the child's rating of their social support. Previous studies had only included parental and teachers ratings, hence it could

be argued that the parents' perception might not be the same as their children's when it came to the level of social support the child perceives was available to him or her. The results suggested that not all children were negatively affected by adverse life events, that is, there was a moderate correlation between stressful events and adjustment and it was dependent on the level of social support and social problem skills available to the child. In other words, children with higher levels of social support and problem solving skills displayed less adjustment problems than children with few support networks and/or problem solving skills. The researchers noted that different support sources may play varying functions and provide different resources, for example, parents may serve as sources of comfort while school teachers may provide resources such as information and the more varied these sources are the better the outcomes for the child.

In a similar study Malecki and Demaray (2006) studied the relationship between social support and academic achievement of 164 students in late primary school and early high school. The participants completed the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS) and the results varied depending on the participant's socio-economic status (SES). That is, students from low socio-economic backgrounds were assumed to have higher levels of stress, as poverty is a known stressor (Malekpour, 2004), and for these participants the correlation between academic achievement and social support was moderate. On the other hand, participants who were classed as high SES, had a low correlation between social support and academic achievement. The researcher stated that social support appeared to be a moderating factor between the risk factor of low SES and academic achievement and hence its effects were most evident the greater the risk factor. Furthermore, the researcher highlighted that different social support sources, for example parents, teachers and friends, served differing functions. That is, according to this research not all sources of social support serve the same purpose a similar finding to Dubow and Tisak (1989). A limitation to be noted

is that this study only included Hispanic students from one school and this affects the generability of the results to children from other ethnic backgrounds.

Pines, Aronson & Kafry (1981) proposed a model of social support that described six differing forms of social support. According to the authors listening support occurs when a person feels others are non-judgemental and genuinely care about what he or she has to say; shared social reality support involves others sharing your understanding of the world and consequently validating your feelings; when people care about an individual or appear to be “on his or her side” they are offering emotional support; an appreciation of ones efforts and accomplishments constitute technical appreciation support; and when an individual encourages someone to better himself or herself they are providing technical challenge support. Even though this model has been applied to human sources of social support it does not have to be restricted to humans as companion animals may be able to fulfil some of the aforementioned forms of social support and consequently become sources of social support during certain life adverse life events.

The Role of Pets

The involvement of pets in divorce disputes has increased noticeably as evident in, and highlighted by, academic as well as popular literature (Memminger, 2006; Mills & Akers, 2002; Porter, 2006). Journal articles such as Britton (2006) and Mills and Akers (2002) expose that divorce cases involving disputes over companion animals are becoming more prevalent and the fighting over the pets are being likened to child custody cases. Moreover articles such as Porter’s highlight that divorce lawyers and judges are indicating an increase in pet-custody cases. However the law still does not recognise companion animals as much more than property, same as a chair or a television set and does not take into consideration the central role many of these animals tend to have on the lives of their owners (Mills & Akers, 2002).

There is ample evidence in the literature researching and supporting the notion that animals can have a positive impact on humans in a variety of settings (Brodie & Biley, 1999; Cole & Gawlinski, 2000; Jorgenson, 1997; Melson, 2003; Sable, 1995; Serpell, 1991). Within therapeutic contexts, researchers have found that the use of animals has helped promote the quality of life and has the potential of producing positive health benefits for patients (Cole & Gawlinski, 2000). In a more general context, Baun, Bergstrom, Langston and Thomas (1984) measured the blood pressure, heart rate and respiratory rate of 24 healthy participants as they spent nine minutes patting a dog they had developed an emotional bond with or an unknown dog with which they had no bond. The results suggested that the greatest positive benefits of petting the dogs, as measured by a decrease in the abovementioned rates, were evident when there was a pre-existent bond between the participant and the animal. The study suggested that a bond with a companion animal can prove to be beneficial to humans. A number of other research studies such as Anderson, Reid, and Jennings (1992), Kaufman & Kaufman (2006) and Serpell (1991) have provided further evidence to support the notion that pet ownership can have a positive impact both physiologically and psychologically.

Pets and Emotional Attachment

According to the family development theory pets could act as emotional substitutes for family members that may be absent or unavailable, such as for children when parents divorce and one parent leaves the family home (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). Albert and Bulcroft also suggested that pet ownership, and the roles and functions of pets, change over the life cycle, especially when the family structure changes due to life transitions. For example, for a young child a pet may serve as a playmate. However when the child grows, this same pet may become a companion and someone in whom the child can confide and share his or her feelings with.

Sharkin and Bahrack (1990) suggested that people form emotional attachments with their pets and these attachments can be as significant as those formed with important people in the person's life, such as parents or children or spouses. On occasions when people feel removed from human relationships, be it due to physical separation or due to circumstances that lead to psychological distancing, the bond with their pets can be particularly significant (Sharkin and Bahrack, 1990). Pets, in particular dogs and cats, have the potential of providing an emotional bond that promotes a sense of well-being and security (Scharlach, 1991). Pets can fill a combination of emotional needs, such as substituting for the absence of human attachments, as well as expanding the range of relationships and social contacts (Sable, 1995). That is, pets provide a common point for a new relationship to be built on or a topic of conversation for two strangers. Although transitions such as divorce can isolate people, pets can lessen this by providing companionship (Sable, 1995) and unconditional affection and support (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988) something that may be lacking at certain times in a person's life.

Cohen (2002) investigated the meaning a pet had in a person's life by asking adult participants to complete a questionnaire in which they were to compare their relationship with their companion animal and their relationship with a family member of their choice and later, randomly selected a group of these participants to be interviewed. The aim of the study was to compare the role of a pet and the role of a human within the context of a family setting. The results suggested that pets, in an urban setting at least, were very much part of the family circle and pets, like other human family members, provided comfort and companionship for these participants. Cadwell (2008) proposed that one of the reasons why pets are becoming more common, and particularly in western, urban environments is because more people are searching for companionship and a sense of family via the ownership of pets.

Researchers have stated that companion animals can play the same role as family members, and can be of particular benefit to children in helping them develop nurturing behaviours and learning to understand nonverbal communication (Beck & Meyers, 1996). According to Beck and Meyers, pets allow people to be alone without feeling lonely, which is particularly relevant when a person has been socially isolated or has poor social networks.

Pets as Social Support

It is well documented in the literature that pets are a source of social support, but not only do they offer social support, but they also increase the frequency of human social support (Beck & Katcher, 2003). That is, rather than isolate a person, companion animals aid in promoting human support and social support is pivotal for a healthy development (Wolchik, Wilcox, Tein, & Sandler, 2000). However at times when human contact is not available Sable (1995) added that pets can be sources of continual friendship, providing unconditional love and reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation during separations or transitions. Myers (1999) stated that pets are of particular importance during traumatic transitions as they are able to provide consolation and reduce the feelings of stress.

Children and Pets

There is also research to support the notion that animal contact is beneficial to children and considerable evidence to suggest that pets have some effect on the development of children (Beck & Katcher, 2003). Beck and Katcher also suggested that pets could aid children develop certain skills, such as nurturing skills and pets are said to promote cognitive development in children (Inagaki & Hatano, 1993). Companion animals appear to be critical for children in many aspects but it seems they play a particularly important role in their emotional and social development. Research into the impact of pet ownership during childhood has found numerous benefits, such as promoting a sense of security; emotional, physical, psychological and social well-being; boosting self-esteem; acting as a buffer against

stressful life events; and lessening the impact of loneliness (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). The crucial role pets play in children's social context has been highlighted by research such as the Neighborhood Walk (Bryant, 1985a).

The Neighborhood Walk as described by Bryant (1985a) was developed in order to assess the social context of children and also to study their sources of social and emotional support. This was one of the first studies to report on the nature and extent of children's social support and the role of this support in the social-emotional development of American minors. The researcher hypothesised that a broad social network would be associated with more positive emotional and social development and the results indicated this. What was surprising at the time was that Bryant (1985a) reported that when 7 and 10 year olds were asked about the ten most important individuals in their lives, on average, these children included at least two pets in their list. Lack of social support poses a risk for children's development; however, it appears pets may lessen this risk by acting as sources of emotional support particularly at times when this support is lacking (Melson, 2003). That is, even though children may be socially isolated from others, such as when parents divorce and the child is removed from his or her social network, having a pet in whom the child confides in and feels a strong emotional bond with, would appear to be enough to lessen the negative effects of the social isolation. Bryant (1985a) stated that the children indicated they would talk to their pets when they were sad, angry, happy and had a secret to share and they were just as likely to share this with their pets as they were with their siblings. This would suggest that having a trusting relationship with a pet does not isolate the child from other humans beings but rather, it provides the child another 'person' in whom to confide, a thought also proposed by Beck and Katcher (2003). Children also expressed that the relationships with their pets were more likely to last no matter what happened, unlike human relationships, which could end due to arguments, separations, such as in the event of a divorce when one parent moves out of the family home

or when children move neighbourhoods (Melson, 2003). This assurance that the pet-child bond will last no matter what, could be one of the reasons why children value so highly their relationships with their pets and derive so much comfort from them.

Future Research

A number of future areas of research are apparent from the current literature. Firstly, Ascione (1992) highlighted that the majority of the current literature dealing with children and companion animals emphasises the positive aspects of pet ownership. The researcher suggested that a greater proportion of future studies should consider the beneficial and detrimental aspects of pet ownership during childhood. A second area of possible research was discussed by Van Houtte and Jarvis (1995). The researchers stated that most studies focus on cats and dogs as companion animals while neglecting to determine whether other pets such as birds, rabbits or fish, for example, have the same impact on children. Future studies should investigate the role these other kinds of companion animals have on children, rather than generalise the findings from dog and cat ownership to other types of pet ownership.

Within the social support literature the main concern centres on the fact that many studies measure children's social support systems from a parental perspective, especially when dealing with younger children (Anderson, 2008). The obvious limitation is that the parents' perception of their children's social networks may not be the actual support systems the children have. Future studies should endeavour to study social support networks from the child's perspective in order to assess more accurately children's social support systems.

Lastly, a small number of researchers have argued that pets can be of considerable aid during life events such as divorce (Albert, 1988; Sharkin & Knox, 2003) but the extent of this research is minimal and restricted to stating that pets can be of benefit during these transitions. The majority of the research in the area of companion animals and children has centred on the benefits pets may have on the child's development in particular social

development (Melson, 2003). However, there are very few researchers who have investigated the role of pets as a source of social support for children and in particular, the role companion animals may take on during stressful life transitions such as parental separation or divorce. Future research studies should take into consideration arguments such as Albert's and Sharkin and Knox's and investigate the role of pets in children's lives during such times.

Conclusion

Children grow up within the context of families. These families are often seen as interconnected networks, with changes and transitions to one member affecting all other members in the network. A common transition for Australian children is parental separation, with census data indicating that 1 in 3 marriages end in divorce (ABS, 2007). There is a trend in the divorce literature highlighting the fact that divorce is a strong risk factor that may affect children's development across many areas. Some of the negative effects children may experience after parental separation or divorce include helplessness, powerlessness, isolation and emotional distress. Although the literature proposes a number of explanations as to why children may potentially be negatively affected by divorce, it also expresses that certain protective factors may lessen this impact. One such factor is social support. Social support can be defined as emotional assistance and resources at a time of need (Anderson et al., 2008). Despite a number of limitations in studies dealing with children and social support, there is a strong pattern in the results. That is, children with good networks of social support tend to exhibit less negative outcomes when faced with stressors. Traditionally, humans have been considered the obvious sources of support networks, however pets are beginning to be regarded as potential sources of social support. Companion animals have long been recognised as providing mainly a positive impact in children's lives. Their benefits range from emotional development to social attachment. Pets are often seen as members of the family by their owners and they are valuable beings in their lives and social networks and this

is also true for children with children often considering them close friends and companions.

However, there are certain gaps and limitations in the current literature and in particular

regarding the role companion animals have in children's lives during stressful life transitions.

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Running head: CHILDREN AND COMPANION ANIMALS DURING DIVORCE

A Parental Perspective: The Role of Companion Animals for Children During Separation and
Divorce
Jessica Michel

Abstract

Divorce and separation are often painful transitions for all, especially for children who tend to be particularly affected. However, protective factors can lessen the negative impacts of divorce and separation on children. Pets have been found to be pivotal parts of children's lives, providing them with numerous benefits. Among the benefits, it has been suggested pets may aid during transitions such as divorce. Through a qualitative design, the role of pets in children's adjustment to divorce and separation as perceived by parents was researched. Eight mothers were interviewed and thematic analysis yielded results suggesting pets are beneficial to children and parents as they experience divorce and separation. It was concluded further research is required to fully comprehend the role of companion animals during divorce or separation.

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October 2008

A Parental Perspective: The Role of Companion Animals for Children During Separation and Divorce

Companion animals are widely recognised by experts and researchers as potentially providing diverse benefits to human beings (Brodie & Biley, 1999; Cole & Gawlinski, 2000; Serpell, 1991). Pets have been associated with improvements in health and well-being (Sable, 1995). In Australia, 63% of households have some kind of pet, with the most common companion animals being dogs and cats (Australian Companion Animal Council Inc., 2007). The reasons for the acquisition of pets are varied; however, the highest proportion of companion animals are owned by families with children (Australia Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2008), as pets are perceived to be beneficial to children (Barker, 1999). Some researchers have argued that one of the benefits of companion animals may arise during transitions (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Sharkin & Knox, 2003). That is, pets may have a positive impact on their owners during life events such as deaths, marriages and divorces.

Divorce is acknowledged to be a stressful and often painful life transition for all parties involved, particularly for children (Short, 2002; Wu & Schimmele, 2007). Research has provided evidence demonstrating the effects of divorce on children can be long lasting and may be evident, to varying degrees, in adolescence and adulthood (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995). Children of divorced parents are more likely to experience increased life stress and family conflict, as well as use inadequate coping skills in their early adulthood (Short, 2002). Similarly, it has been found that adults whose parents had divorced when they were children, were more likely to have lower levels of overall psychological well-being (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001).

Despite the negative effects divorce and separation may have on children, it has been reported that certain protective factors may lessen the negative impact of this transition (Wolchie, Wilcox, Tein, & Sandler, 2000). By reducing the link between a stressor and an

individual's reaction to this stressor, protective factors are said to reduce the negative consequences associated with stressful phenomena (Amato, 2000). Social support has been consistently associated with reduced negative effects of parental separation or divorce (Bryant, 1985a). Bryant (1985b) defined social support "as assistance from any person who causes an individual to feel understood and cared for" (p. 36). Traditionally, it has been assumed social support would originate from other human beings; however, companion animals may also fulfil this need but research is needed in this area (Melson, 2003).

Considering that pets are often seen as family members and common playmates for children (Barker, 1999), Melson suggested that pets could be considered significant part of children's lives by the children themselves and could be potential sources of social support. This paper will briefly review the divorce literature, as well as the literature concerning the impact companion animals may have on children and present the study's research question.

Divorce and Children

Divorce in Australia, as in many western countries, has become more prevalent in recent decades (ABS, 2007). Australian census data indicate that 1 in 3 marriages ended in divorce during the 2000 to 2003 period (ABS, 2007). Although the transition of divorce is likely to affect the development of children regardless of their age, Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan and Anderson (1989) stated most children can be expected to adapt to the dissolution of their parents' union within two to three years of the event taking place so long as no other negative events occur within this time period. However, if additional negative events do occur, the time until the children adapt to the divorce is likely to be prolonged, as the stressors and their effects will be confounded (Hetherington et al., 1989).

It is common for children to experience behavioural disruptions and emotional upheaval following divorce (Hetherington et al., 1989). Some of the commonly reported feelings and behaviours that may be exhibited include feelings of helplessness, powerlessness,

depression and lowered self-esteem (Kalter, Alpern, Spence, & Plunkett, 1984). Short (2002) stated that children from divorced backgrounds, when compared to children living in intact families, were more likely to have lower outcomes across almost all areas including: academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-esteem, social competence and parental relationships. These findings were corroborated by a meta-analysis conducted by Amato and Keith (1991) of 92 studies focusing on children and divorce in which the data consistently found children of divorced parents scored lower across all scales of well-being and functioning.

Although the precise cause of the lowered levels of outcomes for children who have experienced divorce is not known, researchers have proposed numerous explanations, all of which have some empirical support (Amato, 2000). Parental conflict, changes in parenting, economic issues and social factors are some explanations commonly discussed in the literature. Divorce and separation are often associated with high levels of conflict between the partners, consequently children involved in family break-ups are commonly exposed to high levels of parental conflict (DeLucia-Waack & Gellman, 2007). Researchers proposed that children of divorced parents achieve lower developmental outcomes due to the conflict they are exposed to, and hence it is the parental conflict that is of detriment to the children rather than the physical breakdown of the family (Amato & Keith, 1991). Other researchers have investigated the effects of such a transition on the parents (Harknett, 2008) and proposed that during and after a divorce the quality of parenting may decrease for a time while the custodial parent adapts to the new situation, and it is these changes in the parenting style that affect the children's developmental outcomes (Wu & Schimmele, 2007). Another plausible explanation for the lowered outcomes of children who experience parental divorce is the decrease in the economic well-being of the household (Hetherington et al., 1989). That is, a lack of economic resources tends to lead to poorer nutrition, education, a general lack of service accessibility

and social support, which in turn contribute to poorer outcomes for children (Amato & Keith, 1991). Lastly, as discussed by Amato and Keith, some literature focuses on the social deficits associated in growing up with a single parent home as the cause of lower outcomes for children. Amato (2000) stated single parents tend to spend less time with their children, have fewer rules yet be tougher disciplinarians and provide less supervision, and these factors are said to negatively affect children's development.

Children's Coping

The literature states that the effects of divorce are dependent on a number of factors such as the age and temperament of the children as well as pre- and post-divorce circumstances (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001). For example, younger children with difficult temperaments are likely to experience more negative consequences than older children with easy temperaments. The level of social support available to the children is of pivotal importance when determining the effects of divorce (Dubow, Tisak, Causey, Hryshko, & Reid, 1991).

Social support is said to have a buffering effect against stress, with individuals who have high levels of social support having greater protection against the effects of stressful events (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002). Researchers such as DuBois, Felner, Brand, Adan, and Evans (1992) have linked social support to reduced levels of psychological distress in times of adverse life events while Levitt, Guacci-Franco and Levitt (1993) have stated that social support can positively influence self-worth and socio-emotional functioning in children. Social support, according to Carothers, Borkowski and Whitman (2006) has the potential of influencing children's interpretation of stressful events and their emotional response to these events. Larsen and Birmingham (2003) stated that the most important factor for children's successful adaptation when faced with adverse life events is at least one caring adult with whom they can spend time and talk. Furthermore, Hetherington et al. (1989)

described social support systems as one of the five most important factors in predicting long-term adjustment for children who had experienced parental divorce. Dubow and Tisak's (1989) research on social support as a protective factor for children experiencing stressful events, found that not all sources of social support had the same function. For example, parents were sources of comfort, while teachers were sources of information. Similar results were found by Dubow et al. (1991) in their study of cumulative stressful life events and emotional and behavioural maladjustment in children and adolescents. This research would suggest that different sources of social support provide different benefits to children.

Children and Pets

The literature supports the premise that children may benefit from contact with animals and suggests that pets have some effect on the development of children (Beck & Katcher, 2003). Beck and Katcher suggested that pets could help children develop certain skills, such as nurturing skills while, Inagaki and Hatano (1993) reported enhanced cognitive development of children who owned pets. Companion animals appear to be critical for children in many aspects of their lives but it seems they play a particularly important role in their emotional and social development. Research into the impact of pet ownership during childhood has found numerous benefits, such as promoting a sense of security; enhancing emotional, physical, psychological and social well-being; boosting self-esteem; acting as a buffer against stressful life events; and lessening the impact of loneliness (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). The crucial role pets play in children's social context has been highlighted by research such as the Neighborhood Walk (Bryant, 1985a).

The Neighborhood Walk, as described by Bryant (1985a), was developed in order to assess the social context of children and also to study their sources of social and emotional support. It was one of the first studies to report on the nature and extent of social support experienced by American children and the role of this social support in their social-emotional

development. It was hypothesised that a broad social network would be associated with more positive emotional and social development and the results indicated this. What was surprising at the time was that Bryant (1985a) reported that when 7 and 10 year olds were asked about the 10 most important individuals in their lives, on average, at least two pets were included. Although lack of human social support poses a developmental risk, it appears that many children may derive emotional support from their pets, hence lessening this risk (Melson, 2003). That is, although children may be socially isolated from others, such as in the event of divorce or separation when children may be removed from their social networks, having an emotional bond with a pet would appear to be enough to lessen the negative effects of the social isolation. Bryant (1985a) stated that children indicated they would talk to their pets when they were sad, angry, happy and had a secret to share and they were just as likely to share this with their pets as they were with their siblings. This would suggest that having a trusting relationship with a pet does not isolate children from other humans beings, but rather it provides the children with another 'person' in whom to confide, a thought also proposed by Beck and Katcher (2003). Also noted in Bryant's (1985a) study was that children expressed that they felt their relationship with their pets was more likely to last no matter what happened, unlike human relationships, which could end due to arguments or separations. This assurance that the pet-child bond will last no matter what could be one of the reasons why children value so highly their relationship with their pets and derive so much comfort from them.

Pets and Emotional Attachment

Sharkin and Bahrack (1990) suggested that people form emotional attachments with their pets and these attachments can be as significant as those formed with important people in the person's life, such as parents or siblings. On occasions when people feel removed from human relationships, be it due to physical separation or to circumstances that lead to

psychological distancing, the bond with their pets can be particularly significant (Sharkin and Bahrack, 1990). Pets, in particular dogs and cats, have the potential of providing an emotional bond that promotes a sense of well-being and security (Scharlach, 1991). Pets can fill a combination of emotional needs, such as substituting for the absence of human attachments, as well as expanding the range of relationships and social contacts (Sable, 1995; Wolchik et al., 2000). That is, pets can provide a common point for a new relationship to be built on or a topic of conversation for two strangers. Although transitions such as divorce can isolate people, pets can lessen this by providing companionship (Sable, 1995), as well as unconditional affection and support (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988), factors which may be lacking during transitions. Myers (1999) stated that pets are particularly important during traumatic transitions, as they are able to provide consolation and reduce feelings of stress.

According to Family development theory, pets could act as emotional substitutes for family members that are absent or unavailable, such as for children when parents divorce and one parent leaves the family home (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). Albert and Bulcroft also suggested that pet ownership and the roles and functions of pets change over the lifecycle, in particular as the family structure changes due to life transitions. For example, when children are young pets may function as playmates but as children grow, they may confide in and share their feelings with these same pets.

Cadwell (2008) proposed one of the reasons why pets are becoming more common, particularly in western, urban environments, is because people are searching for companionship and a sense of family via the ownership of pets. Researchers have stated that companion animals can play the same role as family members, and can be of particular benefit to children in helping them develop nurturing behaviours (Beck & Meyers, 1996). According to Beck and Meyers, pets allow people to be alone without feeling lonely, which is particularly relevant when a person has been socially isolated or has poor social networks.

Present Study

To date, there exists a limited amount of research on the role companion animals play during transitions such as divorce (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Sharkin & Know, 2003). The present study was based on the extensive literature dealing with the positive impact of companion animals on their owners and in particular on children, as well as studies such as Bryant (1985a) in which children stated that their pets were important sources of emotional and social support. The study's aim was to investigate the role of pets in children's reactions to parental divorce and separation as perceived by the parents. Consequently, the following question was asked: how do parents view the existence of a child-pet bond as influencing the children's experience of parental separation or divorce?

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative exploratory research design was adopted for the present study, given the limited research available and the nature of the research question. Qualitative research considers how people understand and interpret the events that surround them (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). The present study focused on the role of companion animals in supporting children during divorce or separation as perceived by the parents. That is, the study aimed to understand not only the role of the pets for the children but also, how the parents understood the impact the pet had on their children. Qualitative research focuses on how an individual experiences and interprets a given phenomenon. That is, although participants may in essence have discussed similar issues relating to this phenomenon, it was the unique way in which they explained the impact of the companion animals that made the qualitative design appropriate.

A semi-structured interview format was utilised to explore how the parents saw the pet influencing the children during the divorce. This method was selected as interviews are one of

the best mediums to gain insight into an individual's experience (Richards, 2005) and is likened to a conversation, where the focus is only on one person, hence making the process more comfortable for the participant (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). The semi-structured interview format allowed all participants to be exposed to the same questions and probes but also allowed sufficient flexibility for related topics and issues to be discussed.

Paradigm and Assumptions

The goal of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of a phenomenon for the person who has experienced it and to uncover the common features the incident shares with other individuals who have lived through the same event (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). That is, in order to determine what benefits were perceived by parents, the parents themselves had to be interviewed. Their experiences, although similar, would be dependent on their everyday environment or their 'life-world' (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Phenomenology asserts that truth is subjective (Lopez & Willis, 2004) and meaning is created by experiencing phenomena (Caelli, 2001). In other words, no two narratives of the same phenomenon will be the identical, as the meaning is dependent on the person experiencing it. Consequently, the current research aimed at exploring the common perceptions of the participants, rather than searching for one truth.

Participants

Each of the eight participants met four main criteria, these were: divorced or separated; had children over the age of four at the time of the separation; owned a pet or acquired one within 12 months of separating and; the pet and children had gone to live in the same home (see Appendix A). All participants were female, had 16 children in total (6 girls and 10 boys), with the median age of the children at the time of separation or divorce being 6.5 years and had owned dogs and/or cats (see Table 1). The children of the participants were not involved in the research study.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Child's age at divorce	Pet ownership (prior /post divorce)
Tammy	4 (girl)	Dog (10 months post)
	12 (boy)	
	15 (girl)	
Rebecca	4 (girl)	Dog (1 year prior)
	8 (boy)	
Hollie	8 (boy)	Cat (13 years prior)
	11 (boy)	Dog (few weeks post)
	12 (girl)	
Donna	5 (boy)	Cat (2 years prior)
		Dog (6 months post)
Kelsey	3 (boy)	Cat (1 year prior)
	5 (boy)	
Sam	4 (girl)	Dog (10 years prior)
	2 (boy)	
Cassie	4 (girl)	Cat (6 months prior)
Ruth	4 (boy)	Dog (6 years prior)
	3 (boy)	Cat (9 years prior)
		Dog (8 months post)

Procedure

The Family Relationship Centre (FRC) in Joondalup was contacted and a copy of the information letter (Appendix A) with the contact details of the researcher was emailed to the

Centre. The FRC then proceeded to mail out the information letters to its clients. The Edith Cowan University (ECU) research participant register, which consists of a pool of students willing to be involved in research studies, was also contacted. One participant was recruited through ECU and another through FRC. Following this a further six participants were recruited through snowballing (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). A suitable location and meeting time for the interview was negotiated at the time of recruitment.

Before commencing the interview participants read and signed an information letter and a consent form (Appendix B). The study and interview were briefly explained and once the participants were satisfied their questions had been answered the interview began. The first part of the interview consisted of answering background information questions (Appendix D) such as how old the children had been at the time of the divorce or what type of pet had been owned.

The second part of the interview, consisting of a number of questions and prompts (see Appendix C). Both interview parts were audio recorded and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interview included open-ended questions targeting participants who had acquired a companion animal after the separation as well as those who had previously owned a pet. Although an interview schedule was used, the researcher used additional prompts or questions as the interview progressed and ended the interview with the opportunity for the participants to share stories of their children and companion animals. The suitability and face validity of the interview schedule was determined by two academic staff of the ECU School of Psychology.

The researcher took few or no notes during the interview in order for the participant to feel at ease and as if she was engaged in a conversation rather than an interview as discussed by Liamputton and Ezzy (2005). When notes were taken, they were very brief and consisted of describing non-verbal gestures that would enhance the transcripts. At the conclusion of

each interview, participants were thanked for their participation and made aware of support services and organizations (Appendix E). The participants were informed of the date of completion of the research and encouraged to view the final project. After each interview, the data were immediately transcribed verbatim and any notes or thoughts were added to the margin of the transcripts. The data were collected over a period of three weeks until saturation was achieved and it became repetitive and no new insights were gained (Creswell, 2003).

Ethics

Ethical considerations and precautions were taken throughout the research process. Firstly, ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Computing, Health and Science. The audio recordings were deleted as soon as the interviews had been transcribed. The transcripts did not contain any identifiable information, names were coded using single letters; hence protecting the identity of the participants. As well only the researcher and her supervisors were able to access the de-identified transcripts. Lastly, in the discussion of the findings, pseudonyms were used for the participants, their children and the pets in order to protect their identity.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilised to explore the experiences of children who owned a pet during divorce as seen from the parental perspective. Thematic analysis seeks to identify, analyse and report patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were analysed following the steps described by Aronson (1994). After transcribing the interviews, the first step was to search for patterns in the data. These patterns were assigned a descriptive name, for example 'playmate' or 'substitute'. This was done in order to facilitate subsequent analysis. During this first step, significant statements were also noted for later use. Next, all data were grouped into the patterns uncovered during the first step. For example, the data describing companion animals as providing security were grouped together. The next step

consisted of finding themes. Morse (2008) described themes as the essence of the participants' accounts and by putting together these themes they form a comprehensive picture of the participants' collective experience (Aronson, 1994). The last step as described by Aronson consisted of validating the accuracy of the themes by referring to the existent literature. At this stage, the themes were refined and named (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Confirmability and transferability were ensured through a method of member checking as discussed by Miles and Huberman (1994). This consisted of confirming the researcher's interpretations by contacting a random sub-sample of participants by telephone once the data had been coded and themes developed. Member checking ensured the researcher had correctly interpreted the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interpretations of the researcher were also verified by the researcher's supervisors, a form of triangulation in which a number of perspectives are brought into the analysis process (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). In order to aid with the analysis and the conclusion drawing process a reflective journal was utilised (Fassinger, 2005). An audit trail was kept in order to allow for transparency in the research progress as described by Fassinger. The audit trail consisted of a record of the steps taken from the beginning of the research process until the reporting of the data, as well as the researcher's thoughts and impressions during the data analysis. The audit trail also included the preservation of the raw data (the original transcripts of the interviews).

Findings and Interpretations

The aim of the present study was to explore the impact of the child-pet bond on children during divorce or separation as perceived by the parents. Inductive data analysis exposed a number of benefits associated with pet ownership during this time. Three main themes and numerous sub-themes emerged during the data analysis as can be seen in Table

Table 2

Themes and sub-themes of the impact of pets during divorce

Themes	Sub-themes
Children’s coping	Physical comfort
	Emotional comfort
	Companionship
Parental coping	Protection
Pet as educational tools	Responsibility

Children’s Coping

An overarching theme in all interviews was the role of the pet in helping the children cope with the transition of divorce and separation. Participants spoke of the numerous ways in which they perceived the pets as having helped their children adjust to the new situation. One participant stated that for her children the pets had been “... *a big pressure relief system...*” (Hollie) and a similar attitude was conveyed by the other participants. Within this theme physical comfort, emotional comfort and companionship were identified as common characteristics of the pet-child bond.

Physical comfort.

All parents, when asked what benefits the pets had brought to the children stated the animal had been a source of physical comfort. Hollie explained it as follows: “*It’s just that constant contact of having something to be able to ... go up to...*” And similarly when asked if

there was a change in the relationship between the children and the pet after the separation, Rebecca stated: *"They probably cuddled it more. They would often lie on the floor with their pillows and the dog would lie next to them. Things like that, they liked being physically close to her."* And from Donna: *"He definitely was very affectionate towards the dog... patting it, cuddling him."*

Donna stated that the pet could take the place of a significant individual when this person was not available.

... they (pets) come and lick you and be friendly towards you and you have someone to cuddle. Maybe you can't cuddle your mum or your gran or your friend or something... so there's attention and love being offered to you at any time (Donna).

This statement is consistent with research stating that companion animals can be of particular benefit when human contact is not available (Sable, 1995). The constant availability of companion animals help reduce feelings of loneliness during separations and transitions (Beck & Katcher, 2003).

Consistent with the literature, participants spoke of the pets as family members: *"I suppose she's an extended member of the family really"* (Sam). In Cohen's (2002) research, participants not only considered their pets family members but the pets were also perceived to engage in similar roles as human members. Consequently, researchers have argued that pets can become substitutes for family members (Sable, 1995). This was expressed by some participants. For example, when asked about the relationship between her children and the pet during the separation Rebecca said: *"Yes, I think it was like a substitute person..."* She went on to explain that a few months later the partners reconciled and the father returned home the daughter appeared to neglect the dog although previously she had been very affectionate towards it.

And what was interesting is that when her dad moved back home 'Karen' forgot completely about the dog and would not separate from her dad for months and during those first few months after we got back together the dog didn't really exist for 'Karen'. It was all about her dad (Rebecca).

Similarly Sam's children appeared to substitute their absent father with their pet.

I know they definitely include her in the family and I know that when their dad left, because their dad went overseas for a while and they use to draw pictures of the family and they used to include the dog but not the dad (Sam).

Ruth, however, felt their dogs did not become a substitute for her children due to their age. *"I think the fact that they were so young when their dad left that... it wasn't really like a substitute but had they been older maybe the dogs would've become substitutes for them"* (Ruth). Children's ability to comprehend the implications of events increases as they mature (Thomas, 2005); hence the role of pets may be affected by the children's developmental stage.

Emotional comfort.

The animal-human bond literature often discusses companion animals as sources of emotional support (Beck & Katcher, 2003). Sharkin and Knox's (2003) research attributed pets with the ability to promote emotional well-being by reducing the feelings of loneliness and creating a sense of security and the current research also found this to be true. For example, Sam stated that the dog had brought comfort to the children during the separation: *"I suppose she's always been a constant from moving house and everything so yeah. It was something familiar with them, apart from me and the bits of furniture that were familiar... it was almost... a comfort... a comfort-security thing..."* Sharlach (1991) also discussed the sense of security an emotional bond with a companion animal may provide an individual, particularly during transitions.

Parents also spoke of the unconditional acceptance, love and the sense of belonging that the pets gave their children. For example, Kelsey stated that their cat would welcome her sons home after they had been away with their father. *"...when they (the boys) are back ... she would come around every day and just lick one of them and just, you know, scratch against them and then the other one. It's as if she's trying to say you're mine and you're mine...."* (Kelsey). Similarly Donna stated that the reason why the dog was purchased was to give her son a sense of belonging. *"....they decided that... it would be... referred to as 'Ryan's' dog so he had a sense of belonging to the home"* (Donna). Again from Donna: *"...a dog will love you whatever is going on in your life..."* According to Albert and Bulcroft (1988) one of the key characteristics of companion animals is their ability to provide unconditional affection and support. Similarly in Bryant's (1985a) research, children stated that their pets would always be there, ready to listen. Tammy labelled their dog as her son's *"best friend."* While Rebecca conceptualised it as follows: *"It's that extra support and affection, unconditional love, comfort thing, where no one fights and I guess you're accepted for what you are and... the pet is always there."* At a time when children are likely to have been exposed to moderate levels of parental conflict (Amato & Keith, 1991) pets may serve as a haven from the events unfolding around them.

The strong emotional bond many of the children had formed with their pets was evident when the pet became lost or passed away. For example, Kelsey's cat passed away shortly after the separation and she explains: *"...the cat unfortunately died about... three months after the separation, ... I realised that they really missed the cat and that they really needed the cat. They ask a lot of the times for it..."* Unfortunately, the cat they acquired after the death of the first cat had run away approximately four months before the interview and Kelsey stated: *"...my oldest son still, much, sometimes, misses the older one (cat)...they*

had a deeper relationship.” In other words, although the cat had been gone a number of months and they had another cat, the child still mourned the loss of his pet.

Strong emotional reactions to the death or loss of pets were also expressed by other participants. For example, Tammy relating to the death of the dog: *“She also broke our hearts, you know, when she died... that was a big thing. It was very hard for everyone, especially for ‘Derek’. He missed her a lot.”* From Rebecca:

... when we did finally lose the dog it was like losing a family member. Both of them were absolutely devastated... although they were much older they were still very very upset and for a very long time. Like I’ve said, it was like losing a family member.

Similarly from Donna: *“He was very sad when we left, when we had to leave the dog behind. And that was sad for him... So, that’s the problem when you get animals. They creep into your heart.”* Cassie told of her daughter’s reaction when the cat was attacked by a dog: *“...she was absolutely devastated at the thought she might lose him and she would much rather have its leg amputated, which cost \$1070. So we saved the cat because she is that close to it....”* The companion animal literature describes that owners often think of their pets as family members (Cohen, 2002), while Sharkin and Bahrik (1990) proposed that the emotional bonds formed between a pet and its owner are as significant as those formed with human beings

Companionship.

Companionship was a benefit commonly mentioned in the interviews. This is not surprising given that one of the main reasons for acquiring pets is to provide companionship, as proposed by Cadwell (2008). Cadwell stated that one of the reasons pets were becoming more common in western urban areas was because people were searching for companionship through their ownership. Tammy said that for her son their dog was a pivotal source of company. *“For ‘Derek’ it was his best friend... he wouldn’t go anywhere without... the pet”* (Tammy). And similarly from Donna: *“If he went outside he would always call the dog and*

go with him and... so he spent time with the dog." Cassie also discussed the companionship the child derived from the cat after the separation: "... (she) *generally spent more time with it, patting it, just being with the cat ... that sort of thing.*"

In contrast to a change in the children, Kelsey noted a greater change in the cat after the divorce. She explained:

After the separation the cat would have started coming home earlier... and the cat would have been more with us in the living room like lying on them, on the couches and sitting with the children and not running away or anything. So it was more the cat that changed.

Sam also spoke of a change in the pet. *"I know she was a lot more protective of the kids during the separation"* (Sam). According to the family development theory a change in the behaviour of the pet would be natural after divorce due to the fact that families are not static entities but rather change in response to their environment (Hill, 1986). Consequently, pets, as family members, would change also as a result of the divorce or separation (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988).

A number of parents also noted that the pets were distractions for the children from what was happening at the time. For example, when asked what impact the pet had had on her daughter, Cassie stated: *"...I think the cat was a distraction, which was a good thing."*

Similarly, Ruth said: *"....I supposed it gives them something else to focus on."* Hollie explained the benefit of owning pets as follows: *"When you have something else to focus on beside yourself and your own problems... that's always a good thing."* And Tammy said:

...she kept us busy... And it also makes you do things like... things like you have to walk him and the dogs need to do this every day... Even if you're not in the mood they are pushed to do it so while they do that they forget about other, the other little things.

At a time when many changes are occurring, pets may serve as sources of distraction and consolation. Myers (1999) proposed that companion animals may be of increased importance during traumatic events by reducing feelings of stress. From the abovementioned statements it could be proposed that the distraction the pets provided may have reduced the feelings of stress the children may have felt.

Parental Coping

The emergence of a theme not related to the children even though it was the children's experiences that were being explored is natural in this type of research. That is, qualitative research is interested in the participants' experience (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005) and in this study the participants were the parents; hence, their own experiences were integrated into their children's. Unlike positivism, which states that a phenomenon can be measured objectively, qualitative research takes into consideration people's interpretation of the phenomenon (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Thus, although exploring the experience of the children with their pets, the parental experience also emerged and was considered valid and insightful rather than extraneous knowledge.

Protection.

Consistent with the literature the participants, all women, described their dogs as giving them a sense of protection (Tatschl, Finsterer, & Stöllberger, 2006).

In addition to the benefits owning a pet had on the children during the transition of divorce and separation, some parents also made mention of the benefits it brought to them, in particular the sense of protection. When asked why she decided to buy a dog, Ruth replied:

"Ohh right at the moment I can't really remember except for the fact that I liked to have a dog umm and I think it was also for a bit of protection." Ruth and her two young children

lived in a rural area and the ownership of a pet, even a small one, brought her a sense of security. Similarly Tammy shared, *"My brother was the one who said you need protection... it*

(the dog) *was to guard the house.*” And again Tammy: *“I thought it (the dog) would be for protection really.”*

Pets as Educational Tools

Another theme that emerged was the role of pets as tools of education. Participants spoke of the benefit pets had brought to their children’s development. Not only had the pets comforted the children during the stressful transition but they had also helped the children develop positive attributes such as responsibility.

Responsibility.

Pets are said to have the potential of teaching children many important lessons. Beck and Meyers (1996) stated that companion animals can help children develop nurturing skills as well as develop an understanding of nonverbal behaviours. While Melson (2003) suggested pets help children’s development across all areas, Albert and Bulcroft (1988) proposed that pets help children understand the lifecycle and what it requires to stay alive. That is, children who own pets have the potential to care for their pets and consequently become responsible for them. A number of participants confirmed this, stating that their children took some responsibility in taking care of their companion animals after the separation or divorce. After the attack on Cassie’s cat she stated that her daughter: *“...nursed the cat back to health...”* Similarly Tammy stated that her son: *“He took responsibility of feeding the dog and washing him and taking him for walks. It took a lot of responsibility on his behalf.”* Kelsey noted an increased interest in her sons towards the care of the cat after the divorce. *“And they started taking care of the cat more. They make sure there’s food in the bowl and drinking water and if I ask them to go and open up the door to let it in they will remember to do it”* (Kelsey). Ruth also stated her belief in pets as tools for education. When asked why she thought having a pet during childhood was a positive thing she said: *“... it teaches them about a lot of things*

like, ... things they might not learn umm without a pet or they might, maybe they will take longer to learn. Umm like responsibility, I guess would be one thing....”

Summary and Implications

The aim of the study was to determine the role of pets in children's adjustment to divorce as perceived by the parents. This was done through qualitative inquiry. Thematic analysis of the data yielded three themes: children's coping, parental coping, and pets as educational tools. Children's coping consisted of perceived benefits the participants believed the pet had brought to their children. Pets were seen as positive influences on the children and an important part of their lives. This supports the literature that states companion animals are able to have a positive impact on children. The current results from this study, however, are specific to children who have experienced divorce or separation and provide some evidence as to the unique role pets can play in such a situation. The study found that parents also benefited from the presence of a pet in the home post-divorce, suggesting that companion animals may be beneficial for all family members, in particular women and children. Lastly, pets were seen as educational tools, as consistent with the literature, and would suggest that the role of companion animals for children is multi-faceted. Such findings would be beneficial for professionals working with divorced clients, in that they would be able to counsel families regarding the ownership of pets at times of divorce and separation, particularly when children were involved.

Limitations and Future Studies

The abovementioned findings were limited by a number of factors. Firstly, all participants consisted of mothers; hence, the findings were limited to their experiences. In other words, from the present study it is impossible to determine whether fathers would perceive the impact of companion animals on children during divorce in the same manner as the women did. Future studies should focus on the male perspective or have a balanced ratio

of males and females. This would ensure the paternal perspective was also able to be examined, instead of solely the maternal view.

Van Houtte and Jarvis (1995) criticised research in the area of companion animals because it focused on dogs and cats consequently failing to examine the wide variety of animals that people consider pets. Consistent with most of the studies in this field, the present research also focused on canine and feline companions. Although the selection criteria did not exclude other types of pets, the participants only owned dogs or cats. This is consistent with Australian statistics, which report dogs and cats as the most common types of pets (Australian Companion Animal Council Inc., 2007). Future studies should attempt to include a broader range of companion animals to determine whether all companion animals bring similar benefits or if the benefits are restricted to certain types of pets.

The most obvious limitation of this study is the fact that the benefits of pet ownership on children during divorce or separation was explored from a parental perspective. In other words, the benefits discussed are perceived and not actual. It is possible that parents may have perceived that the children felt comforted by the pet when perhaps they did not. Future studies should interview young people or children to explore their experiences when their parents divorced. This would ensure a first-hand account of the impact of pet ownership, during divorce or separation.

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Appendix A

Information Letter

Dear Potential Participant,

Thank you for taking an interest in my research. My name is Jessica Michel and I am a fourth year Psychology Honours student at Edith Cowan University. As part of my course I am required to conduct a research study. This study has been approved by the Faculty of Computing, Health and Science Ethics Committee at Edith Cowan University. In accordance with the ethical guidelines all information collected during the interview will remain confidential and no identifying information will be included in the completed project.

The aim of the study is to explore how the bond between a child and his or her pet may affect the child during parental separation or divorce as viewed by the parents.

To be included in this study you must be 1) divorced or separated 2) have had children (over the age of 4) at the time of the separation 3) have owned a pet at the time of the separation or purchased one within 12 months of the separation 4) the child and pet will have gone to live in the same household.

If you choose to partake in the research you will be asked to participate in an interview lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The interview will consist in answering questions about the experience of your child in relation to his/her pet during the separation/divorce. Your child(ren) will not take part in the interview.

If you would like to take part in the study, please contact me to negotiate a meeting time for the interview to take place. Before the interview commences you will be asked to read and sign a consent form, which also gives permission for the interview to be audio recorded. The recording will allow the interview to be transcribed as accurately as possible in order for it to be analysed at a later time and all recordings will be destroyed after they have been transcribed. Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without any penalty and removing your data if you so wish. If you are interested in the outcome of the project, I can be contacted after the proposed date of completion, December 2008.

The project should not be stressful to the participants but if you feel distressed there are a number of counselling services you can be put in touch with. If you have any questions about the study feel free to contact myself or my supervisors, Dr. Elizabeth Kaczmarek (6304 5193) or Dr. Deirdre Drake (6304 5020). If you would like to speak with an independent person about any concerns you may have contact Dr. Justine Dandy on 6304 5105 or j.dandy@ecu.edu.au

For further information or to participate in the study I can be contacted on 0421 240 487 or jmichel@student.ecu.edu.au

Yours sincerely,
Jessica Michel

Appendix B

Consent Form

I _____ have read the information sheet provided and agree to partake in the research project conducted by Jessica Michel of Edith Cowan University. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand what the study entails. I give permission for the data to be used in the process of completing a Psychology Honours degree and acknowledge that it may be published. I understand that any information that may identify me, such as my name, will not be used. I also understand that I can refuse to answer to any question and withdraw, removing my data, at any time. I grant permission for the interview to be audio recorded and I understand the recording will be destroyed once it has been transcribed.

Signed: Participant

Date

Contact Number

Signed: Primary Researcher

Date

Appendix C

Interview Schedule

1. Can you tell me about your child's relationship with the pet during the separation?
 - (If the pet was owned before the separation) Did you sense a change of your child's feelings towards the pet? If so, how would you describe the change?
 - How would you describe the bond between your child and the pet?
2. Can you tell me what impact, if any, the pet had on the child during the separation?
 - What benefits, if any, do you feel owning a pet brought to your child during the separation?
 - How about any negative impacts?
3. (If the pet was acquired after the separation) Did you believe a pet at this time would be of benefit to your child? Why?
 - Did it prove to be of benefit? In what ways? (Focus on how it benefited the child)
 - Do you feel acquiring a pet had any negative effects on the child?

Appendix D

Demographic Sheet

Can you give me some background information on your pet and child(ren)?

- How many children did you have when you separated/divorced?

- How old was the child(ren) when you separated/divorced?

- What type of pet did you have? How long had you had it for before you separated/ divorced?

- If the pet was acquired after the separation/divorce, how long was it until you acquired the pet?

- Was your daughter/son close to the pet?

Appendix E
Counselling Services

Lifeline

Confidential counselling services

Ph: 13 11 14

Family Relationships Centre

Information and advice

Ph: 1800 050 321

Crisis Care

Confidential counselling services

Ph: 13 16 11

RSPCA Western Australia

108 Malaga Drive

Malaga WA 6090

Ph: (08) 9209 9300

Guidelines for Contributions by Authors For Research Report Only

JMF follows the guidelines of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 5th edition. A general section (pp. 283 - 320) covers manuscript preparation. Access *JMF*-specific, detailed instructions at style guidelines.

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