

# Integrating Pets into the Family Life Cycle



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**Abstract** Many people consider their pets to be family members yet little work to date has incorporated companion animals into the family life cycle. The family life cycle refers to the stages that individuals in a family household experience over time. Stages of the family life cycle typically include leaving home, cohabitation or marriage, childrearing, the empty nest, and widowhood. As family stages and roles change, the roles of individuals and pets change as well. Couples may be brought together by pets or may get pets as they construct a family. Unmarried and older individuals may increasingly live by themselves but have a pet. While negotiating the roles of pets in families and households can be challenging, research indicates that having pets offers benefits including companionship and stress reduction. The stages of the family life cycle and the roles of pets across those stages are described in this chapter.

**Keywords** Animal assisted therapy · Pet therapy · Stress reduction · Pets · Companion animals · Life course · Family life cycle · Child development · Caregiving · Stress · Aging · Health · Well-being · Bereavement · Human-animal interaction · Human-animal bond · Lifespan

## Family Life Cycle

The concept of the family life cycle can be used to ground the study of human-animal interaction in the family context. The addition of a pet may be considered a family transition that is experienced differentially over the life course. For example, changes in family composition and housing environment may impact a family's ability to house pets. Family change, the timing of role transitions, and pets' changing roles in families can be important considerations for human-animal interaction studies over the life course.

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In the U.S., changes in family patterns and increases in longevity have made it meaningful to distinguish younger adults, adults at mid-life, and the elderly. The life course dimension that clearly reflects this distinction is the presence of children, both dependent and adult, in the home. While today married couples may spend 30 or more years together after their children leave their home, 130 years ago married couples were unlikely to survive jointly to see their youngest child married (Glick, 1955, p. 9). Since the 1970s, there has been a trend toward fewer family and married-couple households. Social and family changes, including delays in age at marriage, increases in divorce, and increases in non-martial childbearing, have led to greater numbers of single person and single-mother households. More children are likely to grow up in single-parent households. More adults are living alone, particularly those aged 65 and older (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013).

Despite these changes in composition, families continue to make up the majority of households in the United States. The family life cycle has been used as a tool to describe families developmentally (see Duvall, 1988 for an overview) as well as from a demographic perspective (Glick, 1955). Communication and interaction among family members vary across the life course and vary by the type of social bond. The family life cycle comprises four types of social bonds: the couple (or spousal dyad), the parent-child dyad, the sibling relationship, and the relationship between friends (David-Barrett et al., 2016). Rollins and Feldman (1970, p. 21) describe 8 detailed stages:

- Stage I. Beginning Families (couples married 0 to 5 yrs. without children)
- Stage II. Childbearing Families (oldest child, birth to 2 yrs. 11 mos.)
- Stage III. Families with Preschool Children (oldest child, 3 yrs. to 5 yrs. 11 mos.)
- Stage IV. Families with School-age Children (oldest child, 6 yrs. to 12 yrs. 11 mos.)
- Stage V. Families with Teenagers (oldest child, 13 yrs. to 20 yrs. 11 mos.)
- Stage VI. Families as Launching Centers (first child gone to last child's leaving home)
- Stage VII. Families in the Middle Years (empty nest to retirement)
- Stage VIII. Aging Families (retirement to death of first spouse).

The stages of the family life cycle reflect role variation with age: Young adults are more likely to live alone or, if married, be childless or recent parents; at midlife adults have growing children; and older adults will have completed childrearing and moved into the role of grandparent. Not all families experience the detailed stages outlined by Rollins and Feldman, and later studies of the family life cycle often collapsed stages (see Duvall, 1988; Glick, 1989). In part this has occurred because relationship and marital status changes have become more complex in modern families. Cohabitation before marriage is common. Widowhood has been postponed. Together with increases in divorce and remarriage, these changes have meant that marital status transitions are less concentrated at the beginning and end of the adulthood.

Applying this conceptualization to the study of companion animals in families, pets may serve varying roles across the stages of family development. The family life cycle is a family developmental perspective, emphasizing the roles and functions of family members; the family life course focuses on individual's transitions and trajectories (see O'Rand & Krecker, 1990). The developmental perspective can also be used to link the family life cycle and life course concepts: a period of adjustment

accompanies any role change, and role changes are typically associated with transitions. The terms life cycle and life course are often used interchangeably across disciplines (see Schvaneveldt, Young, Schvaneveldt, & Kivett, 2001; Turner, 2005).

Family life cycle stages correspond to stages of the individual life course: young adulthood, family formation, parent, empty nest, and elderly. In the 1990s, sociologists merged the concept of the life course with the developmental concept of the family life cycle (Bengston & Allen, 2009). Life course theory is used to understand how individual trajectories are embedded in social pathways over time (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). The concept of the family life course is used to describe the connections among individuals that may be shaped by their family background (Gilligan, Karraker, & Jasper, 2018). Similar connections to those described in the family life course may also occur between individuals and companion animals.

Non-biological families are socially constructed and may include non-human members. Fictive kin, or chosen family, are individuals who are unrelated by either blood or marriage but regard one another as family (Muraco, 2006; Taylor, Chatters, Woodward, & Brown, 2013). Relationships with pets may be embedded in family relations and conceptualized in terms of kinship (Charles, 2014; Irvine & Cilia, 2017; Power, 2008). In the case of companion animals as family, the family concept is expanded to interspecies relationships (Owens & Grauerholz, 2019) or the anthropomorphism of pets (Greenebaum, 2004). Studying “pet parents,” Owens and Grauerholz suggest that interspecies families may function as a nontraditional pathway to parenthood.

## Pets as Family Members

Pets can be an important component of family life (Cain, 1985; Esposito, McCordle, Maholmes, McCune, & Griffin, 2010; Mueller, Fine, & O’Haire, 2019; Soares, 1985; Triebenbacher, 2006; Walsh, 2009b). In the United States, 67% of households own a pet (APPA, 2019) and pets are often considered to be family members. According to the 2018 General Social Survey (author’s calculations, Smith, Davern, Freese, & Morgan, 2018), 90% of pet owners “often” or “almost always” consider their pets to be members of their families, with women (93%) reporting pets as family more often than men (85%). These results are consistent with the 2014 Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) Child Development Supplement (CDS) where 85% of primary caregivers and roughly 93% of children reported “often” or “almost always” considering their pets to be members of their families (Bures, Mueller, & Gee, 2019). Chapter “[Health over the Life Course and Human-Animal Interaction](#)” (Bures, Esposito, and Griffin, 2021) describes several large population representative surveys in the United States that include human-animal interaction questions.

Relationships with pets, particularly dogs and cats, offer forms of attachment that are associated with social and emotional well-being (Sable, 1995; Wanser, Vitale, Thielke, Brubaker, & Udell, 2019). Crawford, Worsham, and Swinehart (2006) discusses the differences between traditional attachment theory, as characterized by the Strange Situation or Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), and human-companion animal attachment. While human-companion animal attachment is distinct from

human attachment, the general concept of attachment is relevant: Many of the perceived benefits of human-animal interaction are associated with companion animal attachment. For example, companion animals may be associated with strong emotional bonds, compatibility, a sense of security, and benefits to physical and psychological health (Cain, 1985; Crawford et al., 2006). A body of evidence shows that animals, particularly dogs and cats, have the capacity to develop attachment to humans as well (Berns, 2013; Udell, Dorey, & Wynne, 2010; Vitale, Behnke, & Udell, 2019).

Across the life course, pets are often considered members of an individual's family or social network and provide emotional support when coping with family life cycle changes and stress. The importance of the pet as a source of affection and attachment is related to household structure and changes over the life course (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). Strong relationships with pets can result from accepting a pet as a primary emotional support, bonding with a pet over their personality, and having experienced transitions or change together (Reisbig, Hafen, Siqueira Drake, Girard, & Breunig, 2017). Homeless persons may consider their pets as best friends and family members, providing social support and encouraging physical well-being (Irvine, 2013). Family pet attachment is associated with both family adaptability and cohesion (Cox, 1993).

The potential for attachment and the roles and benefits of companion animals vary over the family life cycle. Based on the stages outlined by Rollins and Feldman (1970), this chapter considers the role of attachment to pets for three broad states of the family life cycle: young adults and childless couples; families with children; and empty nest and aging families.

### *Young Adults and Childless Couples*

Young adults leaving the family home are establishing themselves as individuals separate from their family of origin. Young adults living alone may have a childhood pet or acquire a new pet (or pets). The relationship between an independent young adult and their companion animal may offer insights into their level of responsibility and relationships with others. Among college students, pets function as sources of social support (Meehan, Massavelli, & Pachana, 2017). Pets may also increase the quality and quantity of social interactions (Veevers, 2016), for example, by facilitating physical activity and social interaction through dog walking and other activities. At the same time, young single adults may find it challenging to manage the financial responsibilities of a pet (Hodgson & Darling, 2011).

Attachment to pets is stronger among single individuals without children (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). For newly married couples with no children or pets, the decision to have a companion animal may serve as a prelude for children, or it may be part of cost-benefit analysis, as illustrated by the song "I bought her a dog:"

I met a little lady that I couldn't live without  
 Much to everyone's surprise I finally settled down  
 Started making payments on a house

tucked out in the country  
First three years flew right by  
Everything was going fine  
till she threw me a curve  
late one Friday night  
She said: I think it might be time  
we got started on a family  
She swore a baby was the answer  
to make our dreams come true  
So I bit the bullet  
and I did what any good, loving husband would do:  
I bought her a dog. (Rickman, 2009)

While these lyrics oversimplify the pet decision-making process, they provide an example of the type of cost-benefit calculation that may take place. As couples create a family of their own, a pet may serve as a transition to or replacement for children. The desire for children may be triggered by loneliness or an unmet need to nurture. Attachment to a pet may reduce feelings of loneliness when pet relationships serve as a surrogate for other types of relationships, including the parent-child relationship (Krause-Parello, Wesley, & Campbell, 2014).

Perceiving a pet as a surrogate child may lead to the development of an identity as a parent (Laurent-Simpson, 2017a). Laurent-Simpson (2017b) drew on interviews of childfree companion animal owners and found that the companion animal relationship may reinforce previous fertility choices such as delaying or completely opting out of childbirth. One pathway for these outcomes was that the pets often satisfied their need to nurture without having children. She describes a level of attachment between the women and their pets that often characterized the pets as surrogate children, not just family members. Using a family life course lens to understand how couples negotiate the role of pets in families can inform research on parenthood, childlessness, and the cultural reshaping of “family” to include multispecies families.

### ***Families with Children***

The role of companion animals in families evolves with the addition of children to the family and as children age. Pets can complement growing families but, they also bring challenges and potential health risks such as allergies and bites (Wanser et al., 2019). With the addition of a new family member, such as the birth of a child, pets may experience jealousy or stress. In families with young children, parental attachment to pets and time spent with them may decrease (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988).

The strength of children’s attachment to pets, particularly dogs, is related to family size and type (Wanser et al., 2019). Children in single-parent families tend to have stronger attachment to dogs than those in two-parent families. This relationship is

strongest for children in early childhood. For older children, no significant difference between family type and attachment to dogs was found (Bodsworth & Coleman, 2001). Children often consider their pets as siblings (Power, 2008) and may be more likely to confide in a pet than in a human sibling. They also report fewer conflicts with their pets than with other siblings (Cassels, White, Gee, & Hughes, 2017).

As children transition to adolescence, caring for pets often increases. Early adolescents report gaining responsibility, friendship, and knowledge from their pet (Covert, Whiren, Keith, & Nelson, 1985). Hawkins and Williams (2017) found strong associations between pet attachment and caring behavior among 7–12 year olds. The researchers suggest that encouraging children to care for pets may contribute to positive outcomes for both the children, through better well-being, and the pets, through better care. Young adolescents in families with dogs reported more overall satisfaction and companionship with their pets than did owners of other pets (Cassels et al., 2017).

The findings on the impact of pets on adolescents and their families is mixed. This may reflect other transitions that occur during this period as well as transitions in the types of family pets. Marsa-Sambola et al. (2016) analyze a large sample of 11- to 15-year-old adolescents from England, Scotland, and Wales and describe a number of sociodemographic differences in pet ownership. Older adolescents were more likely to have dogs and less likely to have smaller pets such as reptiles, fish, amphibians, or small mammals. Family characteristics are also associated with having a pet and type of pet. In an Australian study, older adolescents (mean age 15.9) were found to have little interaction with pets, and having a pet had no significant health benefits (Mathers, Canterford, Olds, Waters, & Wake, 2010). Other research on rural adolescents suggests that companion animals may reduce adolescent loneliness and facilitate social support networks (Black, 2012).

For adolescents, pets offer a non-judgmental companion and the opportunity to share affection (Damour, 2019). Attachment to pets such as cats and dogs is associated with improved quality of life and interactions with parents and friends (Marsa-Sambola et al., 2017). More research across adolescence is needed to better understand how relationships with pets mature (Muldoon, Williams, & Currie, 2019). The impact of companion animals on child development is discussed in greater detail in chapter “[Human-Animal Interaction and Child Health and Development](#)” (Mueller, 2021).

### *Empty Nests and Aging Families*

As individuals and families age, the potential health benefits of pets, or *zooeyia* (Hodgson et al., 2015), may increase. While the empty nest is associated with generally positive effects on well-being and marital satisfaction (Davis, Kim, & Fingerma, 2016; White & Edwards, 1990), physical health may begin to decline at midlife (see Brim, Ryff, & Kessler, 2019). Broader definitions of family are associated with greater social-needs fulfillment (Buchanan & McConnell, 2017). While Buchanan

and McConnell did not focus explicitly on pets as family, the idea that families can help to buffer stress is consistent with much of the literature on pets and socialization.

Companion animals meet relational needs for consistent, reliable bonds and may facilitate transitions through disruptive life changes (Walsh, 2009a). As children leave the home, pets may offer the companionship similar to that of other family members. Companionship has been identified as one benefit of owning a pet (Garrity & Stallones, 1998). Age, having no children, or living in a household of one or two people has sometimes been associated with a stronger companion animal bond (Cohen, 2002).

Pets can serve multiple roles for individuals with long term chronic conditions such as diabetes or chronic heart disease. Relationships with pets may contribute to stress reduction by reducing cardiovascular reactivity (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002). By helping individuals manage emotions, pets can help improve disease management (Brooks et al., 2013). For chronically ill older adults, a pet can serve as an important companion and as a motivating force for getting out of the hospital, returning home, and being active. Ryan and Ziebland (2015) found that the strength of the human-animal bond was recognized by family members and care providers who, in some cases, brought the patient's pet to the hospital setting.

For caregivers, pets may provide support and stress relief but at a cost. In a study of dementia caregivers, pets provided relief from stress but posed an additional care burden. An additional stressor could be the relationship of the caregiver's spouse with the pet, which often changed as a result of disease progression (Connell, Janevic, Solway, & McLaughlin, 2007). Pets may have stronger health benefits for single individuals (Allen, 2003). For example, dogs may take on the role of a partner when it comes to emotional disclosures (Evans-Wilday, Hall, Hogue, & Mills, 2018). Elderly dog owners tend to be less socially isolated than elderly individuals without pets (Hajek & König, 2019).

For older individuals transitioning to residential care, the exclusion of companion animals makes the transition a double loss of both home and family member that can have a negative impact on their well-being (Fox & Ray, 2019). Pets provide support and companionship and should be considered as part of individual care planning (McColgan & Schofield, 2007).

Companion animals can play an important role in well-being in later life (Walsh, 2009a). For the elderly, who may face the loss of a spouse/partner or experience changes in health status and other disruptions, a pet can be an important constant that helps maintain the activities of daily life (Fox & Ray, 2019). Pets often supply comfort and reduce feelings of loneliness during adversity or stressful family transitions such as divorce or bereavement (Sable, 1995). Chapter "[Successful Aging and Human-Animal Interaction](#)" (Gee, 2021) discusses this in more detail.

## Family Well-Being and Pets

Viewing a companion animal as a family member is positively associated with better well-being (McConnell, Paige Lloyd, & Humphrey, 2019). Pets play a complementary role to humans in the family. The identification of pets as family members and the related family narratives reflect the functions of pets in a household (Tovares, 2010). For situations where human companionship is lacking, pets may help to fill this gap (Cohen, 2002).

Pets can provide emotional support during periods of stress (Melson & Fin, 2015). Pets can also serve as a protective buffer between family stress and individuals, particularly children. These are important elements of family resilience and helping families deal with stressful situations (Walsh, 2016). For example, in a sample of families with an autistic child, the benefits of pet dog ownership persisted 2–3 years later at follow-up and included reduced family difficulties and parental stress (Hall, Wright, Hames, Mills, & PAWS Team, 2016). Linder, Sacheck, Noubary, Nelson, and Freeman (2017) found greater average attachment to dogs and lower perceived social support from peers and parents among children aged 8–13 who are overweight or obese. This suggests that dogs may serve a larger role in the social support networks of overweight/obese children's than for healthy weight children.

Children's experiences with animals are an important part of the evaluation process for professionals who encounter children exposed to, or at risk for, family violence (McDonald et al., 2018). The well-being of family and pets is frequently intertwined in cases of interpersonal violence, which is often linked to animal abuse (Flynn, 2011). Flynn (2000a) noted that family scholars typically overlooked the issue of violence to animals despite the potential for negative developmental consequences: a link with interpersonal violence, the potential for animal abuse, and the abuse of animals as a marker for family violence.

While pets can serve as important sources of emotional support in abuse situations, they can also serve as scapegoats (Flynn, 2000b). Concerns for the pets' well-being may cause women to postpone seeking assistance or shelter. Women whose pets had been threatened or harmed were more likely to report that their pets had influenced their decision to leave or stay (Faver & Strand, 2003). Some victims report that pets provide their main source of support, and that they choose to stay in an abusive relationship because shelters do not allow pets (Newberry, 2017).

Children exposed to family violence are at increased risk of exposure to companion animal maltreatment. This childhood exposure may be associated with the development of childhood and adult psychopathy (McDonald et al., 2017). Overall, children exposed to domestic violence experience both risks and benefits associated with pets in the household (Collins et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2017) and often have high levels of positive engagement with pets (McDonald et al., 2018).

High levels of positive engagement with a family pet moderate the effects of exposure to violence on negative psychological outcomes (Hawkins et al., 2019). More



research is needed to understand the separate and cumulative effects of both interpersonal violence and animal maltreatment in the family setting and the implications those have for family well-being.

## Conclusion

Human beings have interacted with animals for thousands of years. The relationships between humans and companion animals may be characterized by a strong emotional attachment or a working partnership. Pets, like dogs, may serve as companions or offer security and serve as hunting partner. While many individuals consider their pets to be family members, not all families will have pets or want them. There may be differing attitudes about pets within a family. Pets may cause conflict in families or bring families closer together. As with inter-personal relationships, the role of companion animals varies over the family life cycle.

The concept of the family life cycle can be used as a tool to ground the study of human-animal interaction in the family context. The changing roles of companion animals in families can be important considerations for human-animal interaction studies over the life course. Incorporating the roles and functions of pets into the family life cycle explicitly links companion animals to family change and transitions. In this context, the addition, or loss, of a pet may be considered a family transition that is experienced differentially over the both the family life cycle and an individual's life course.

Distinguishing between the family life cycle and the family life course draws attention to the need for the inclusion of measures of companion animals and attachment in long-term longitudinal studies. Without such data, researchers cannot tell the full story of human-companion animal interaction over the family life cycle. In addition to variation over time, such studies would shed light on variation in family and companion animal ownership patterns by race, ethnicity, and culture. These factors may shape both patterns of pet ownership, such as number of or types of pets, as well as attitudes about the role of companion animals in families. Future research on families and companion animals should include diverse, longitudinal, population representative samples when possible.

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