

## The concept of “pets” as perceived by 4-8 year-old children

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### Abstract

A number of studies examining the interaction of children with animals have shown the benefits of animals on the physical, mental, emotional and social development of children. Especially thanks to pets, children can learn a great many things like love of nature and animals, in addition to developing a sense of responsibility and loyalty and building good relationships. This study aimed to put forward the concept of “pets” as perceived by children aged between four and eight. The study group used in this research consisted of kindergarten and 1st - 2nd grade primary school children (n = 94) from Bursa Province (Turkey) over the 2014-2015 school year. Semi-structured interview questions and the children’s drawings of “pet themed” pictures were employed as data collection tools. A document review of the collected data was conducted and analyzed using content analysis techniques. According to the results obtained, while a large number of the children knew the concept of “pets”, they had different ideas about the characteristics of pets, as was revealed in their drawings. Moreover, regarding the perception of pets, there appeared to be a difference between children who had pets and those who did not.

Keywords: early childhood, child, pets, perception.

## 1. Introduction

Over a period of half a century, since the term “attachment theory” was first used by Bowlby in 1958, it has been the subject of multidisciplinary research and discussion in the scientific world. An analysis of studies on the subject shows that the attachment theory has been much discussed, explored and applied in many different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, education, zoology, etc. It has become especially notable in psychotherapy.

Studies have shown that a child’s relationship with animals affects the individual’s social behaviour, personality characteristics and cognitive abilities (Muslu & Conk, 2011). Children’s development in various areas is supported by their love of animals, love of watching them, being curious about them, and taking responsibility for their care. Studies have shown that interaction with animals have psychological, emotional, social and physical benefits for children (Muslu & Conk, 2011; Odendaal, 2000; Anderson & Olson, 2006; Walters et al., 2008; Zasloff & Hart, 1999; Gee, et al., 2007).

A child can interact with people and attempt to socialize through a pet. Sharing sadness and happiness with pets can be psychologically comforting. Furthermore, playing with pets can aid in the small and large muscle development of the child. Looking after a pet can help to develop a child’s sense of responsibility. A child gets pleasure from giving something and helping and can fulfill his sense of commitment. In addition, the need to be himself and knowing that he can maintain this bond, can contribute to the development of the child’s self-esteem (Ilden Kockar & Senol, 2000).

Furthermore, from daily experience in non-verbal communication with animals, children are better able to understand the feelings of and take into account the perspectives of “others”. Being kind to animals is an effective way to guide children to become healthy adults in the future. Interacting with animals provides an opportunity for children to reach this goal (Maruyama, 2010).

In general, working mothers and fathers spend time away from the home and because of this, have less time to devote to their children. Children also spend a large part of their time at school, or at home with the television or on the Internet. Depression, stress and loneliness are the consequences for individuals in families with these situations. Thus, in order to achieve a healthier and more placid society, Bustad (1996) proposed combating this serious situation. The activities of feeding pets, stroking them, playing with them, together with passing the time of day with them were observed to reduce problems in individuals.

Children’s experience with animals at an early age determines the attitudes they develop towards animals and is an important factor affecting their love of animals. In this context, taking care of pets at an early age also plays a role in a child’s perception of pets.

In the early stages of childhood, talking about animals, singing songs, playing games and listening to stories about animals attracts a child’s interest. In addition, frequent emphasis on animal figures in the pictures that they draw also has a place. As long as the interest in animals is consistent with the age of the child, participating in such activities helps to establish a child’s love for animals and nature. Pictures play an important role in a child’s early learning process; listening to illustrated stories or drawing pictures correspond to the reading format (Ugurlu, 2013).

Depending on their intellectual, emotional and social developmental stages, children’s drawings are a product of their own thoughts and feelings, tools that reflect their inner world and life experience (Samurcay, 2006). According to Yavuzer (2005), the picture a child draws also reflects a piece of himself. Drawing pictures is a dynamic activity for children, and it is a simple tool of expression. All life within their environment is reflected in children’s pictures, and because they express themselves by way of pictures, evaluation of their pictures is recognized and used in many fields, especially that of psychology (Jalongo & Stamp, 1997).

Accordingly, this study was aimed at evaluating the perception of pets in 4-8 year-old kindergarten and primary school children by examining their pet-themed drawings.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Research model

For this study, a screening model was used. The study was conducted by examining pictures drawn by kindergarten and 1st and 2nd grade primary school children between the ages of four and eight, and by asking them open-ended questions with the aim of determining their perceptions of pets. Screening models are used as a research method aiming to describe an event in the past or a presently existing situation (Karasar, 2002).

### 2.2. Sample group

The study group used in this research consisted of kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> grade primary school children ( $n=94$ ) from the Province of Bursa, Turkey, enrolled in the 2014-2015 school year. Information on the demographic characteristics of the sample group can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of frequency and percentage of sample group demographics

Variables	Sub Categories	N	%	Total
Age	3-4 years	26	27.65%	94
	5-6 years	46	48.95%	
	7-8 years	22	23.40%	
Sex	Female	45	47.87%	94
	Male	49	52.13%	
Pet ownership status	Yes	50	53.20%	94
	No	44	46.80%	

According to Table 1, when the demographic variables of the children in the sample group are examined, it can be seen that, in terms of age, the highest number were between five and six, that the distribution of boys and girls was very close, and that more than half of the children (53.20%) had pets.

### 2.3. Data collection tools

As a data collection tool in this study, a semi-structured interview form was prepared for the children. In order to assess the children's perceptions of pets, they were asked three open-ended questions: "What is a pet?"/ "What are the characteristics of a pet?"/ "Do you have a pet?" At the same time, a second data collection tool, the projective data collection method, was employed, using the pictures drawn by the children to learn their feelings and thoughts about pets.

### 2.4. Data collection methods

The children accepted as participants in this study were put at ease as by having met before, spent time together and established communication by participating in classroom activities. Afterwards, they were individually asked the questions on the semi-structured interview form by the researcher. After the interview questions, all the children in the class were given drawing materials (drawing paper and pencils in twelve different colours) and were asked to draw pictures. They were told that they could draw anything they liked on the subject of "pets". The picture drawing was made into a class event and drawings were requested from all the students. In order to accurately reflect the pictures drawn by the children concerning pets, the relationship between the drawn figures and the pets, the avoidance of exaggeration in figures, the use of bright or cool colours, etc. were examined separately by the researchers.

## 2.5. Evaluation and analysis of data

In this study, the data obtained from the semi-structured interview forms are given in frequency and percentages. In addition, for the drawings, the evaluations of the children, researchers and experts were relied upon. A document review was made of the collected data and analysed using content analysis techniques.

## 3. Results and Discussion

In this study assessing the perception of pets in 4-8 year-old children, the frequency distribution of their views on the open-ended questions were obtained and interpreted. Accordingly, the frequency distribution of the children’s answers to the question in the study “What is a ‘pet’?” is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of the children’s answers on the meaning of “pet”

What is a “pet”?	Frequency (n)
Animal that lives and is fed in the home	44
Cat/ dog	17
Bird	4
Animal people love to look at	4
Small animal	3
Fish	3
Animal that does what we say and want it to do	2
Animal that looks after itself	2
Ferocious and biting animal	2
Living creature	2
I don’t know	2
Trained and intelligent animal	2
Beautiful and sweet animal	2
Sheep	2
Rabbit	2
Large animal/cow	2
Grazing animal (lives on grass)	1

An examination of Table 2 reveals that a large number of the children understood the concept of “pet”. When describing a pet, besides the general idea, they were able to give those they see around them, cat, dog, bird, fish, etc. as examples. Furthermore, some of the children gave answers like “trained animal”, “an animal that does what we say and want it to do”, and “an animal that lives on grass (grazes)”, taken from their past memories, or based on experience.

Again, in the study, the children in the sample group were asked to expound on the question “What are the characteristics of a pet?” The frequency distribution of the students’ answers is shown in Table 3. Table 3, shows that the majority of the children responded with positive features of an animal’s temperament. Similarly, the positive behavioural characteristics of pets were more frequently emphasized in their comments. Moreover, when the children were describing the features of pets, they intentionally mentioned the skills of animals and animal care.

Table 3. Distribution of the children's answers about the characteristics of a pet

What are the characteristics of a pet?	Frequency (n)
Physical features of animal (Colour, size, fur/feathers, tail, teeth, ears, etc.)	16
Positive features of animal's temperament (Cute, sweet, smart, sensitive, strong, funny, happy, friendly, etc.)	47
Negative features of animal's temperament (Angry, aggressive, nasty, irritable, scary, etc.)	9
Characteristics associated with positive behaviour (Listens to owner, not aggressive, plays with owner, obeys commands, guards against thieves, etc.)	21
Negative features related to behaviour (Bites, scratches, pecks, puffs up head, etc.)	9
Features relating to animal care (drinks milk, eats fodder/food, eats wheat, loves carrots and lettuce, etc.)	10
Features relating to skills (can fly, can swim, can sing, can run, etc.)	13

In a comparison of the children's demographics with the answers they gave, it was found that almost all of the children with positive perceptions of pets kept pets at home. In other words, it can be said that children who had pets, compared to those who did not, had a more positive view of pets. Relatively speaking, keeping a pet at home once again emerges as an important benefit for children. Furthermore, Poresky (1988, 1996), in his studies examining the effects of pets on 3-6 year-old children, applied self-esteem and empathy scales and observed in his findings that children with pets rated higher in self-esteem and empathy skills than children who did not have pets.

In general, when the drawings made by the children were assessed, more pictures of cats, dogs, birds and tortoises were seen in the drawings of the children having a correct understanding of the concept of pets. However, a difference was seen between the drawings of children who had pets and those who did not.

When the figures in the drawings of the children who had pets were examined, it was observed that the animals' forms were drawn correctly, the animals looked happy and were drawn with brighter colours. Examples of drawings of the children who had pets are shown in Figures 1 and 2.



Figure 1



Figure 2

When the drawings of children who did not have pets were examined, most of the animals drawn by these children looked angrier, with unhappy expressions and wore collars, or there were barriers like a house or tree drawn between the child and the pet. Furthermore, in these children's drawings, there was much more use of cool colours. Some preferred red to draw the animal figures and coloured the whole page red. According to Yavuzer (2005), children who prefer red may from time to time display aggressive and assertive behaviour, so their colour preference for the figures may have negative connotations. This preference may give us a hint about the feelings these children want to express. This may support the idea that the drawings of children who preferred red or dark colours like black were commenting on their negative impressions of pets.

Furthermore, in the drawings of some children, the animals' teeth and claws were emphasized, or imaginary horns and exaggerated figures were seen. Figures 3 and 4 show examples of drawings of the children who did not have pets.



Figure 3



Figure 4

#### 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

It emerged that most of the children in the study understood correctly the whole concept of pets and their characteristics.

In the drawings made by the children, 72% showed positive attitudes towards pets and 24% showed negative attitudes, while 4% of the drawings showed indications of both positive and negative attitudes. In the children's drawings, the greater use of bright colours for the figures, especially in those of the children who had pets, expressed a happier child-pet relationship. As for the drawings of the children without pets, these children preferred cooler colours and included exaggerations like sharp teeth, huge mouths, etc. in the figures, while some drew a barrier between themselves and the pet (a house, cage, fence, etc.).

Findings in the literature support the results obtained by this study, and it is recommended that keeping pets at home and in school should be encouraged in order to give children a positive concept of pets, and to enable them to develop a sense of responsibility, and better self-esteem and empathy skills.

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