

## COVID-19: A Study on the Effects of Pet Attachment & Perceived Family Functioning on Psychological Well Being & Loneliness among Adolescents

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### ABSTRACT

One year into the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing measures have forced schools to operate virtually. For children and adolescents, these closures mean lack of access to social and psychological resources provided by the school. Adolescence is a period of life marked by in-creasing autonomy from parents and more focus on peer relationships. During this time, forced social isolation could have a serious impact on the well-being of these young individuals. The purpose of the current research is to study the effects of pet attachment and perceived family functioning on psychological well-being and loneliness in adolescents. Standardized tools were used to measure pet attachment, family functioning, loneliness, and psychological well-being among 62 school going adolescents (31 pet owners, 31 non-pet owners) between the ages of 12-17. No significant effect of pet ownership on family functioning, well-being or loneliness. Future re-search is needed to study the long term effects of social isolation on adolescent well being. Further research is also needed in the area of human-companion animal relationship.

**Keywords:** *Pet attachment, Psychological well-being, Family functioning, Loneliness, Adolescents, COVID-19.*

*“Globally, around 131 million school children in 11 countries have missed three quarters of their in-person learning from March 2020 to September 2021” – UNICEF, 2021.*

The effect of the pandemic on mental health is observed across all ages. However, there is significant risk to adolescents. School closures bring along with them a myriad of associated problems. Peer interaction, which is the primary source of social support in adolescents (Frey & Rothlisberger, 1996), has become limited. Disruption of school routines has an adverse effect on children with existing mental health problems (Lee, 2020). Prolonged quarantine has been shown to increase the risk of neurotic disorders (Aleksandrov & Okhrimenko, 2020). This sudden lack of support, both psychological and social, provided by the school, has given rise to a need to study factors that may buffer the negative psychological effects of the pandemic in adolescents.

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French author, Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette once said, “Our perfect companions never have fewer than four feet.” For millennia, humans have depended on animals for food, shelter, clothing, and transportation. But over the last few centuries, there has been an increase in the number of animals domesticated solely for the purpose of companionship. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of pet owners has seen a steep increase, not only in India, but all over the world. Research shows that one in five American households (ASPCA, 2021) and 3.2 million households in the UK (Tyler, 2021) got a new pet during the pandemic. These ‘Pandemic Pets’ have played a huge role in comforting all of mankind at a time when uncertainty was at an all-time high. Therefore, pets may act as a potential source of emotional support for adolescents during this time. There is some evidence to support that adolescents who own pets are less lonely than those who don’t (Hartwig & Signal, 2020).

Perceived family functioning also serves as an important factor affecting the psychological impact of the pandemic on adolescents. Positive interpersonal relationships and a congenial family environment also help facilitate positive psychological development (Perrino et al., 2015) and can offset psychological and physiological impact of stressors (Taylor et al., 2004). On the other hand, non-conductive family interactions can worsen the effect of stressful life events (Stern & Zevon, 1990).

### ***Pet Attachment***

According to Bowlby (1977), “Pet attachment refers to a close, emotional bond between a human and an animal which provides emotional and physical support.”

A study by Kurdek (2008) shows that humans and pets act as significant attachment figures for each other.

Love, affection, support and relief from emotional distress are a few features of strong pet attachment bonds (Field et. al, 2009). Cox (1993) found a significant correlation of pet attachment with both, family adaptability and family cohesion.

### ***Family Functioning***

According to Dharmraj & Ng (2021), “Family functioning is defined as the frequency of normal family routines, effectiveness of family communication and problem solving, family cohesiveness and how well the family members get along.”

A study by Shek (1998) showed that family functioning was associated with life satisfaction, hopelessness, purpose in life, self-esteem and general psychiatric morbidity.

The study also showed that family functioning perceived by the adolescent, relative to family functioning perceived by the parents, had a consistently stronger association with measures of adolescent psychological well-being.

According to Partridge & Kotler (1987), family processes like cohesiveness and conflict, tend to have a greater impact on the well-being of adolescents than family structure.

### ***Loneliness***

According to Copel (1988), loneliness is “an emotional state in which an individual is aware of the feeling of being apart from another or others, along with the experience of a vague need for individuals.” According to Sadler & Weiss (1975), there are two components of loneliness; emotional and social. Emotional loneliness is related to the absence of a

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meaningful and intimate relationship whereas social loneliness is related to the absence of broader social group relations.

A study by Brennan & Auslander (1979) showed that adolescents who are lonely tend to dislike themselves and others, are passive and display more aloofness than other youth. Purewal et al., (2017) found evidence to suggest that childhood pet ownership has a variety of emotional health benefits, especially for loneliness.

In their study, Antonacopoulos & Pychyl (2010) found that people with pets and high levels of social support were less lonely than people without pets.

### **Psychological Well Being**

According to Burris et al. (2009) Psychological Well Being refers to “the simple notion of a person’s welfare, happiness, advantages, interests, utility and quality of life.”

According to Campbell et al. (1976) “Psychological well-being is concerned with the assessment of a person’s current state of affairs.”

Close parent-child relationships, shared family activities and favorable family environments have positive effects on overall adolescent well-being (Aufseeser, 2006)

A study by Rask et al. (2009) showed that adolescent perception of mutual respect and equilibrium in the family system are related to adolescent well-being.

McConnell et al. (2011) found that people who owned pets performed better on well-being measures than non-pet owners.

### ***Purpose***

The aim is to study the effect of pet attachment and perceived family functioning on psychological well-being and loneliness among adolescents.

### ***Hypotheses***

- There will be significant effect of pet attachment on family functioning, loneliness and well being.
- There will be a significant effect of family functioning on loneliness and well being.
- There will be significant differences in the level of perceived family functioning, loneliness and well being between pet owners and non pet owners.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Sample***

The sample included 62 school-going adolescents (31 pet owners, 31 non-pet owners) aged between 12 and 17 primarily from the Chandigarh-Panchkula-Mohali region.

### ***Measures***

The following standardized tests were used for collection of data:

- **Short Attachment to Pets Scale (SAPS):** The scale was developed by Muldoon and Williams in 2010. It consists of 9 Likert scale items with five possible responses ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”. The score was the sum of

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items and ranges from 9 to 45. Items 2-9 were reverse recorded for the validation of the scale. A higher score indicated a higher level of attachment to the pet.

- **Family Assessment Device-General Functioning Scale:** The scale was developed by Epstein et al., in 1983. It consists of 12 Likert scale items with four responses- “Strongly Disagree”, “Disagree”, “Agree” and “Strongly Agree”. The score was the sum of items, and every odd item was reverse scored. A higher score indicated lower perceived level of family functioning.
- **De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale:** The scale was developed by De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg in 2006. The short 6 item version of the De Jong Gierveld Scale was used to measure loneliness. It had two sub-scales with 3 items each- emotional loneliness and social loneliness. Each item had five possible responses- “None of the time”, “Rarely”, “Some of the time”, “Often” and “All of the time”. Scale scores were based on dichotomous item scores with the response “Some of the time” always indicating loneliness.
- **Emotional Loneliness Score-** Neutral and positive responses (“Some of the time”, “Often” and “All of the time”) were counted on negatively formulated items. The score ranged from 0 (not emotionally lonely) to 3 (very emotionally lonely).
- **Social Loneliness Score-** Negative and neutral responses (“None of the time”, “Rarely” and “Some of the time”) were counted on positively formulated items. The score ranged from 0 (not socially lonely) to 3 (very socially lonely).
- **Overall Loneliness-** The score was the sum of emotional and social loneliness scores and ranged from 0 (not lonely) to 6 (very lonely).
- **Adolescent Well Being Scale:** The scale was developed by Birlson in 1980. The scale consisted of 18 items with 3 responses- “Most of the times”, “Sometimes” and “Never”. The responses were scored as “0”, “1” and “2” respectively and the total score was the sum of all responses.

**Procedure**

Potential participants were invited to participate in the study online using various social media platforms. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured confidentiality. The questionnaires were administered using Google Forms. Standardized tools were used to gather data from the relevant sample.

**RESULTS**

*Analysis of Data*

*Table 1 shows the N, Mean and Standard Deviation of the sample.*

	<b>Pet Attachment</b>	<b>Family Functioning</b>	<b>Emotional Loneliness</b>	<b>Social Loneliness</b>	<b>General Loneliness</b>	<b>Well Being</b>
N	62	62	62	62	62	62
Mean	31.4	24.5	1.52	1.90	3.34	14.5
Standard Deviation	9.05	5.46	0.954	1.39	1.73	3.90

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*Table 2 shows the correlation between the variables.*

	<b>Pet Attachment</b>	<b>Family Functioning</b>	<b>Emotional Loneliness</b>	<b>Social Loneliness</b>	<b>General Loneliness</b>	<b>Well Being</b>
Pet Attachment	-					
Family Functioning	0.074	-				
Emotional Loneliness	0.012	0.184	-			
Social Loneliness	-0.178	0.429***	0.038	-		
General Loneliness	-0.146	0.435***	0.649***	0.732***	-	
Well Being	-0.133	0.009	-0.177	-0.139	-0.195	-

*Table 3 shows the results of T-test of the variables.*

	<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Statistic</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>
Family Functioning	N	31	24.35	5.155	-0.185	60.0	0.854
	Y	31	24.61	5.823			
Emotional Loneliness	N	31	1.42	0.958	-0.797	60.0	0.429
	Y	31	1.61	0.955			
Social Loneliness	N	31	2.19	1.352	1.672	60.0	0.100
	Y	31	1.61	1.383			
General Loneliness	N	31	3.48	1.610	0.659	60.0	0.675
	Y	31	3.19	1.851			
Well Being	N	31	14.74	4.449	0.421	60.0	0.513
	Y	31	14.32	3.310			

## **DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

The results found out that there was no significant correlation of pet attachment with family functioning, loneliness or well-being. This is consistent with the results from a study by Mathers et al. (2010) which found that no correlation between pet ownership and adolescent health or well-being. The results also found a significant correlation between family

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functioning and social loneliness ( $r = 0.429$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) as well as general loneliness ( $r = 0.435$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Further, the results also observed that family functioning had no significant correlation with pet attachment and well-being. It is also observed from the results that there is no significant difference between pet owners and non-pet owners in family functioning, psychological well-being and loneliness.

### CONCLUSIONS

Adolescence is a key developmental period marked by physical as well psychological changes. During this exploratory period, an amalgamation of several factors may be responsible for influencing their mental state. Some of these factors might be time spent with technology (Chamaraman et al., 2020), peer relationships (Swords et al., 2011), parental relationship (Oldfield et al., 2015). In addition to these, social isolation due to the pandemic might also have a significant impact on the mental state of adolescents.

Most of the existing research studying the effects of pet ownership has been conducted on adult population. Future research should examine the effect of pet ownership on other factors like empathy, peer relationships and sibling relationships. The results of studies examining human-animal relationship and its effects on human life have been mixed thus far. Further investigation has the potential to study the phenomena in greater depth.

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