

Pets and Chronically Ill Children

Linda J Spence PhD, RN, Kerrie L Vanden Bosch Ms, Lana Kaiser MD, DVM
Human-Animal Bond Initiative
College of Nursing, Michigan State

Almost 20 million children in the U.S. have a chronic illness or disability and over 5 million children experience severe or moderately severe chronic conditions. Chronic childhood illness requires on-going management in the home, often with complex regimens that permeate daily life creating stress for both the child and the family. Biomedical advances have increased the lifespan of these children which may lead to increased long term psychosocial and physical sequelae. Early intervention to enhance their quality of life could lessen later psychosocial problems and promote long-term adaptation. The present student is the first to examine the role of pets for chronically ill children.

Health benefits of companion animals have been described across psychological, social, physiological, and behavioral spheres for healthy children and children with disabilities. Companion animals can serve as a confidant and friend as well as a source of noncontingent, nonjudgmental love during times of stress. There is no empirical literature that has examined these benefits for children with chronic illnesses. Since approximately 80% of homes with children in the US have pets, it seems likely that many chronically ill children may already be benefiting from pet relationships.

The present study used a stress-coping model to investigate the role of pets in the adaptation of chronically ill children using Type I diabetes mellitus as a representative illness. Both pet ownership and pet relationships were examined. In the context of the theoretical model for this study, pet relationships were viewed as a resource that might directly affect other resources such as perceived self-competence and coping. Questionnaires were administered to 109 school age children with Type I diabetes mellitus during a home visit. Eighty-one of the children had a pet at the time of the data collection, 19 previously had a pet and 9 children never had a pet. For the children with pets, pet relationship was positively related to perceived self competence in behavioral conduct. Thus stronger pet relationships were associated with children liking the way they behaved, feeling they did the right thing and avoided getting in trouble. For both children with pets and those who previously had pets, pet relationships were positively related to the use of approach coping strategies such as problem-solving and seeking social support. These findings suggest that for chronically ill children a close relationship with their pet has beneficial effects and some of these effects may extend beyond actual pet ownership.