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Pet Ownership and Socioemotional Outcomes in Hong Kong Families of Children with and Without Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

Keeping pets for companionship is a common practice in Hong Kong families. Pets may serve as an integral component of the family system, supporting children throughout their developmental stages. This study examined the socioemotional outcomes of pet ownership, the mechanisms of child-pet interaction, and pets' supportive roles for families of children with and without Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Hong Kong. A mixed-methods design was adopted. The quantitative sample comprised 263 Chinese children aged 6-12 (129 pet owners, 134 non-pet owners), with 60 ASD children in the pet group and 63 in the non-pet group. The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews with 12 families (six from the ASD group, six from the non-ASD group). Results revealed that children with pets reported significantly fewer internalizing difficulties. Four mediators—child-pet attachment, positive emotion, comfort gained from emotional bond, and comfort gained from physical proximity—collectively mediated the relationship between child-pet interaction and both internalizing difficulties and social competence. Parent-child-pet interaction time significantly moderated the relationship between parent-child attachment and three socioemotional outcomes. No significant differences were observed between children with and without ASD. Qualitative findings revealed that most children treated their pets as family members, displaying attachment behaviors. Parents consistently reported enhanced socioemotional and developmental outcomes, alongside improved family functioning. In conclusion, this study provides robust evidence of the socioemotional benefits associated with pet ownership. It also offers practical insights for facilitating positive child-pet interactions within households for children with and without ASD in Hong Kong.

Keywords: Human-Animal Interaction; Autism Spectrum Disorder; companion animals; pet ownership; socioemotional outcomes