

Abstract

This study investigated the effect of pet ownership and pet attachment on preschoolers' empathy and theory of mind development. Preschoolers aged between 3 and 5 (N = 42) were recruited which contained 20 pet owners and 22 non-pet owners. Results showed that greater attachment to pet is correlated with advanced theory of mind ability, as hypothesized. Specifically, the effect was observed only for affective attachment but not for behavioral attachment. Besides, no significant correlation was found for the hypothesis that cognitive empathy predicts theory of mind ability, nor for the hypothesis that pet ownership correlates with empathy and theory of mind development. Past studies showed inconsistent results on the effect of pet ownership on children's development, thus suggesting a need for further studies. The last hypothesis that empathy moderates the relationship between pet ownership/attachment and theory of mind ability was not supported, which directed the attention to examine the role of the two components of empathy, affective and cognitive empathy. Discussion was based upon the explanation of the research findings and the contribution of the present studies to the directions for future research.

Keywords: pet ownership, pet attachment, theory of mind, empathy, cognitive development