

Animal Magic- Using the Health and Social Care Standards for Looked After Children.

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Abstract

The article advocates taking a positive, proactive approach to having animals and pets in the lives of looked after children. Links are made with the new Health and Social Care Standards. The life enhancing difference that animals can make for some looked after children in promoting their self-esteem and resilience are explored.

Keywords

Animals, feeling safe and happy, Health and Social Care Standards, life enhancing.

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Introduction

This article celebrates the positive difference that being around and caring for animals can make for looked after children. It explores the benefits and makes a case for a proactive approach. It is intended to be thought provoking and encourage care professionals and providers of services for looked after children to seek out ways animals can play a role in the lives of looked after children. It is structured around some of the new Health and Social Care Standards (2018); making links between these, and the life enhancing benefits for many looked after children of having animals in their lives.

The Health and Social Care Standards

The Health and Social Care Standards published in April 2018 set out what everyone using care services in Scotland should expect when using health, social care or social work services in Scotland. The Standards are underpinned by five principles: dignity and respect; compassion; be included; responsive care; and support and wellbeing. They aim to drive improvement, promote flexibility and encourage innovation in how people are cared for and supported. The Health and Social Care Standards are based on human rights and the wellbeing principles; they set out what people should experience from their care and support. The new standards take a risk benefit approach.

Standard 2.24: I make informed choices and decisions about the risks I take in my daily life and am encouraged to take positive risks which enhance the quality of my life

For looked after children and young people this is especially important. Looked after children are individuals with aspirations, talents and hopes waiting to be encouraged and developed. They may have experienced trauma and loss and have had lots of different people caring for them. They may have missed out on positive early childhood experiences or not been able to take advantage of opportunities. Keeping pets and being around animals takes commitment, money and energy but has a range of advantages for looked after children.

Contact with animals can provide something special and magical in addition to human interaction and can enhance relationships.

There are challenges for the sector and for scrutiny bodies in the new Health and Social Care standards that have concepts of compassion, empowerment and love at their core. These are not always easy to evaluate. For scrutiny bodies such as the Care Inspectorate there is a fundamental shift in focus from seeing whether something is done correctly to asking how successful interventions are in improving outcomes and experiences for people. For a scrutiny body there is also a need to support improvement and raise aspiration.

Standard 1.6: I get the most out of life because the people and organisation who support and care for me have an enabling attitude and believe in my potential.

One of the ways children can get the most out of life is by interaction with others. Growing up with a pet can bring emotional, social and educational benefits according to a study by Purewal, Christley, Kordas, Joinson, Meints, Gee and Westgarth (2017). Chandler (2005) outlines the psychosocial life stages and how being around animals can support achieving these and incorporating positive qualities into developing personalities. So, pets can have benefits for most children and support healthy child development. Additionally, there are particular benefits for looked after children, meaning it is important careful consideration is given to how animals can play a part in their lives. For example there are opportunities in caring for animals to make rewarding choices and develop positive self-esteem. For some looked after children this can be transformative. When children give and receive nurture and affection from animals they can feel lovable and happy. They can build trust which in turn can be transferred to other relationships.

Some looked after children do have opportunities to care for pets and be around animals but it is a matter of chance rather than part of a planned, informed approach. This article challenges care professionals and services working with looked after children to consider whether looked after children are having positive experiences with animals as part of their childhood. Gilligan (2000)

emphasises the importance of looked after children having a secure base and that animals are an important element of this, promoting their self-esteem and resilience.

The needs of looked after children are often complex. Their backgrounds and experiences are diverse but many have experienced multiple, serious adversities including trauma and loss. Kennedy and Priestley (2015) demonstrate that looked after children are significantly more likely to have physical health conditions, poorer mental health and face multiple barriers when it comes to addressing these. This standard is therefore particularly relevant for them.

Standard 1.29: I am supported to be emotionally resilient, have a strong sense of my own identity and wellbeing, and address any experiences of trauma or neglect.

Perry (2001) was influential in enhancing understanding of the impact of trauma on children's brain development. His work helps explain attunement and responses to complex communication needs. He outlined how traumatised children pay greater attention to the non-verbal cues from their environment. They need help to process information differently and develop the parts of the brain so they understand and internalise new verbal and cognitive information. To do this they need to achieve calmness. There is strong anecdotal evidence that being with animals makes many people feel happier and calmer. This evidence is further supported by emerging scientific evidence that interacting with animals can lead to strong levels of oxytocin release. This is the hormone that can enhance emotional wellbeing and our ability to feel empathy for others. Daley Olmert (2009) outlines that this hormone also has physical health benefits, reduces stress hormones and has a strong anti-inflammatory impact. Research undertaken by Demello (1999) concluded that systolic and diastolic blood pressure as well as heart rate decreased when animals were present.

There are various studies on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) which demonstrate a long term, powerful and cumulative association between childhood trauma and adult mental and physical ill health and behaviours (Danese, Morffit, Harrington, Milne, Polancqk, Pariante, Poulton and Caspi 2009).

Intervention and support using a range of methods is therefore critical in understanding and addressing these issues. Animals for some children are one of the ways they are supported to overcome adversity in childhood and lead successful adult lives. For some children it is easier and safer to engage with animals. Being safe and feeling safe are different things.

Standard 2.8 I am supported to communicate in a way that is right for me at my own pace, by people who are sensitive to me and my needs.

The calming and non-threatening presence of animals for some children can be soothing and helps provide some internal control over their emotional response. Caring for and communicating with an animal, for example when grooming a horse or stroking a dog, allows the child to have a safe space and a break from some of their own inner emotions. Children can be heard by animals without being interrupted or feeling judged. Levinson (1969) identified animals as showing spontaneous behaviour, being available for interaction, providing unconditional love and being loyal and affectionate.

Standard 3.10: As a child or young person I feel valued, loved and secure.

The new Health and Social Care Standards reflect the voices of care experienced people that their care is based on love and trust.

Enabling children who have experienced complex trauma, as many of our looked after children have, to feel valued, loved and secure can be challenging. As this article has outlined, trauma can affect brain development. Children can present in a range of ways that makes it hard for them to receive nurturing experiences. Some children who display trauma based behaviour, such as behaving in a hostile and rejecting manner or being withdrawn, struggle to allow caring adults to connect with them. Some of these children will however allow animals with their spontaneous non-threatening communication in as a bridging experience and then start to form other connections and attachments. There are therefore compelling arguments for services working with looked after children to explore

options to include animals as part of children's experiences. In the Care Inspectorate's (2018) resource, *Animal Magic* there are examples of looked after children's voices directly outlining why pets and animals are important to them. The report and accompanying podcasts are available on the CELCIS website [<https://celcis.org/knowledge-bank/search-bank/animal-magic-report/>].

There is evidence that animals can support healthy child development for all children, enhance empathy and lead to fun and laughter. For looked after children the traumatic experiences they are more likely to have experienced can dominate their sense of self and they need different experiences to create a more balanced and healthy identity. Animals can offer this in extraordinary ways. They can provide something special and unique that is different and enhances happiness. For looked after children animals can be part of a therapeutic response that allows them to feel loved, secure and valued. This article invites you to consider the benefits of some animal magic for the looked after children you support.

About the author

Qualified in social work since 1990, Mary has worked in a range of childcare settings with looked after children. Mary also has extensive experience of regulation and scrutiny. Mary is part of the management team within the Children's Directorate of the Care Inspectorate. Mary led on the Care Inspectorate's resource, *Animal Magic* published in July 2018.

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