

## Book Review

**Adams, P. (2015). *Dogs and pets in fostering and adoption*. London: BAAF. pp.88, ISBN 9781910039250, £9.95**

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For years my parents ran a residential school. At the top of the main staircase usually lay 'Crisp' and afterwards, 'Leo' – Golden Retrievers – whose docile natures often made them appear more rug than canine. For children visiting for a potential placement, the welcome provided by these dogs (which was conditional only on equal shares in cheese scones) must have made an impression, as they were often mentioned in letters from children expressing a desire to take up a placement. Children were frequently being looked after away from home for the first time. Then, as now, there was often as much grief at the loss of a pet as there was of family members. The book, *Dogs and Pets in Fostering and Adoption* by Paul Adams, argues that for children with traumatic backgrounds, a dog or pet can provide a vital bridge between carer and child. Although it appears that Adams is a firm believer in the benefits of pet ownership (indeed from the outset he declares his status as a dog owner), he has successfully balanced the benefits with the need to ensure safety for children as well as for the pets themselves.

Adams states that 'humans are more likely to form attachment relationships with animals when they have fewer social networks' (Adams, 2015, p.8) and for children beginning a care journey, a dog or other pet may provide an opportunity for an uncomplicated relationship. This book highlights some of the issues you may well need to consider objectively before committing to keeping a pet.

In likelihood for residential services, if you are looking to purchase this book then you may already be considering a dog or pet. A chapter entitled 'Advantages and disadvantages of keeping dogs as pets' highlights the many benefits and drawbacks of pet ownership, signposting some of the recent studies exploring the therapeutic benefits of animal contact, and in particular dog ownership. Recently, my own experiences of dog ownership has brought back into focus just how quickly children can begin to relate to an animal. Children are able to enjoy playing with the dog as well as gaining an understanding of what it takes to look after him, the latter being an excellent way for children to

discuss their own experiences of being cared for without having to link this directly to themselves.

Adams notes that although one in four families own a dog in the UK, attitudes towards them varies considerably. In a small section devoted to the risks posed towards animals by children, Adams notes the careful consideration that must be given to the process of matching any child to a foster placement where animals are already present. An animal is an additional factor in an already complex calculation and it is not only the direct interactions between children and animals which need to be considered, but also that placements can be affected by carers being over protective or prioritising the needs of their animals over the children they care for. To this end, Adams provides information on cultural issues, allergies and health issues to consider when placing a child in a home with pets, as any of these could contribute to placement breakdown. Sections devoted to other animals give advice on everything from fish, rodents, horses and reptiles.

I have found, however, that I am continually amazed at the parallels between raising a puppy and raising a child, something which I have only admitted in small circles until now. Adams, however, gives credence to my thoughts and states, 'Dogs need owners who are consistent and predictable and meet their needs in a way that promotes feelings of safety, security and contentment' (p.20). I could not help but feel that perhaps people who are capable of engendering these feelings in others may make not only good dog owners but also good residential workers.

Adams provides clear guidance for aspects which need to be carefully considered before any pet is introduced into a child's environment or vice versa. Particularly helpful to practitioners are likely to be the checklists and (almost inevitable) risk assessment pro-forma towards the rear of the text, which provide a comprehensive appraisal of the dog and circumstances in which child and dog will find themselves. Helpfully, there are worked examples of assessments which further give examples of issues to consider such as how to introduce a child to an animal.

Regardless of the suitability of a dog or pet in a residential service setting, it is perhaps not the potential risk which remains the biggest barrier but the question of who takes responsibility for the animal. In a busy residential service, adding the chore of dog feeding and walking may be an unwanted additional burden to many staff teams. In conclusion, Adams calls for local policies not to be overly rigid but to consider individual circumstances, ultimately seeking advice from an animal expert where a decision needs to be made.

This book does not only provide a balanced view of the benefits and risks involved in pet ownership, but, perhaps allows us to see that with careful consideration we can bring these benefits to the children in our care.

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