

Received:
02/03/2026
Accepted:
11/03/2026

Keywords:

Pets, residential
child care,
relationships,
wellbeing,
Scotland.

DOI:

[https://doi.org/
10.17868/strat
h.00096118](https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.00096118)

Short Article

Risk it for a dog biscuit

Ross Buchanan

Service Manager, Care Visions

Abstract:

In January 2024, a young person asked whether her dog could come live with her. Initially this was declined due to balancing her needs, the dog's welfare, and the needs of our other residents. We were aware of the Care Inspectorate's *Animal Magic* resource and the benefits of human-animal relationships so alternative ways of providing meaningful contact with animals were attempted. A year later, circumstances changed, prompting us to reconsider. With guidance from colleagues, research evidence, and conversations with another home that had successfully supported pet ownership, the risks and benefits were reassessed and Max moved in. Since then, we have observed transformative changes in the young person's wellbeing, relationships, engagement with education, and ability to regulate. This reflection outlines the process, challenges, and significant positive impact of supporting a young person to live with her dog.

Introduction

In January 2024, a young person moved into our home following a period of risk-taking behaviour in her community and a breakdown in family relationships. She looked forward to visits from her parents, especially when they brought 'her dog'. Shortly after moving in, she asked whether Max, her Jack Russell terrier, could come and live with her. At the time, I said 'no.' I did not believe it would be possible to safely balance her needs, the dog's welfare, and the needs of the other young person living in the home.

Although I was aware of the Care Inspectorate's *Animal Magic* report (2018) and had previously seen the benefits of relationships between care-experienced young people and animals, I sought alternative ways to provide 'meaningful experiences with animals.' Staff occasionally brought



in their own dogs, and we arranged visits to petting zoos and wildlife parks, but these opportunities were not equivalent to the stability and attachment created by owning a pet.

Revisiting the Decision

Fast forward to early 2025: the young person's parents informed us that they needed to rehome Max, as they were no longer able to manage her behaviour alongside their other dogs. At the same time, we had begun to notice an increase in risk-taking behaviour from the young person. She expressed very clearly that losing Max would have a significant and detrimental impact on her emotional wellbeing and on her relationship with her parents. We reflected on this and recognised that we had underestimated the importance of her bond with Max—a relationship that had carried her through periods of isolation and uncertainty, challenges in school, and significant transitions in her life. Max had been her one consistent protective factor.

With this new understanding, we committed to revisiting the possibility of Max living with her full-time. I contacted the author of *Animal Magic*, who provided excellent guidance. Although the wider evidence highlighted the benefits of relationships with animals, there was limited guidance on young people owning and caring for their pets while living in residential care. However, our Care Inspector connected us with another children's home which supported a young man who lived full-time with his dog. The manager visited us and shared the benefits they had seen.

Considering the Evidence

I reviewed research by Janine Muldoon and Jo Williams (University of Edinburgh, 2022), which explored the impact of pet ownership for care-experienced young people, including the emotional effects of losing a pet. Their findings aligned with what we already knew: pets can support both physical and mental health through unconditional relationships; they provide a secure base; they promote routine and responsibility; and they help young people develop social connections. These findings were echoed in research on pet ownership among autistic children.

Planning for Max's Move

By this point we felt confident. We had support from the Care Inspectorate, an example of good practice from the only other Scottish children's home we knew of with a similar arrangement, a foundation of



research, and a clear understanding of the risks and benefits - both of allowing the dog to move in, and of the parents rehoming her elsewhere. The conclusion was clear.

The next step was determining how to do this safely and practically. Understandably, there was some anxiety around this and a lot to consider, so we began by working closely with the young person's parents. We agreed that:

- The parents would retain legal ownership of Max.
- Day-to-day care would transfer to the young person with support from staff.
- The parents would remain responsible for insurance and veterinary costs.
- If concerns arose, Max would return to the family home.

We then worked with the young person and the full care team to establish reasonable expectations around routines, responsibilities, and the level of support required. These naturally evolved over time but provided a solid starting structure. A comprehensive risk assessment followed, along with a shared agreement between the young person, her parents, and staff. We also sought permission from our other resident, along with his family and social worker. Fortunately, the home accommodates only two young people, so this was manageable.

Max officially moved in on the 23rd of March 2025.

The Impact One Year Later

- A year later, the benefits have been remarkable:
- The young person has not engaged in any risk-taking behaviour since Max moved in.
- She is happier, more relaxed, and has been able to form secure relationships with staff.
- She is attending school, engaging in learning, and gaining qualifications.
- Her relationship with her parents has strengthened, as have her peer relationships.



- While there were challenges with training, routines, and responsibilities, these were worked through together, strengthening the attachments around her.
- Even during periods of challenging behaviour from the other resident, we observed less damage and more consideration for others when Max was present.

Figure 1: Max



Recently, one young person moved out and another moved in. Max was an integral part of our matching considerations, and this created no barriers. The new resident has joined a genuinely homely environment—one that reflects the rhythm of family life. He has benefited from entering a space where people care for each other and for Max, and where Max's own gentle and reciprocal nature contributes to a sense of safety and belonging. This has supported his transition, helping him feel settled and secure from the outset.

Reflections and Conclusion

Supporting a young person to live with her dog required careful planning, collaboration, and a willingness to revisit assumptions about risk. By focusing on relationships and wellbeing, rather than barriers and precedent, we created conditions that allowed the young person to thrive.

This experience has reshaped our understanding of what nurturing, trauma-informed, family-like care can look like in a residential setting. Max has become part of the fabric of our home—and an important part of the young person's healing.

The dog's name has been changed to protect the identity of the young people and staff.



References

Care Inspectorate (2018). *Animal Magic*.

<https://hub.careinspectorate.com/how-we-support-improvement/quality-improvement-programmes-and-topics/animal-magic>

University of Edinburgh, School of Health in Social Science (2022). *Pets and changing homes: The views of care-experienced children/young people*. <https://health.ed.ac.uk/research/current-research/pets-and-changing-homes-the-views-of-care-experienced-childrenyoung>

About the author

Ross Buchanan has managed a small two-bed children's residential service for ten years. His practice is rooted in person-centred and trauma-informed approaches, with a commitment to nurturing environments that promote safety, stability, and meaningful relationships for care-experienced young people.

