

Children's Mental Health and Family Life Changed by Pandemic Puppies

During the [coronavirus disease 2019](#) (COVID-19) pandemic, multiple families got puppies, mainly to help them with their mental health.



Study

About 1.6 million UK homes have one or more dogs. Dogs are part of the family in these homes, and multiple family members consider themselves the dog's owner. This contrasts with the common [misconception](#) that one person, usually an adult, owns the dog.

A prior study showed that 38% of people in the UK who currently own a dog acquired it during the pandemic, resulting in "[pandemic puppies](#)." The pandemic years were marked by lockdowns, periods of severely restricted physical social interactions, and widespread fear of severe illness and death. Rising rates of mental ill-health, coupled with the belief that having a dog in the household would help counter emotional negativity, led to the pandemic puppy trend.

Very little is known about the benefits of pet ownership for children or adults, which has prompted this current study. The researchers conducted an [online survey](#) in three parts. They compared households that got a dog in 2019 with those that got a dog during 2020-21. Since few people responded in the 2019 group, statistical comparisons were underpowered, and the qualitative analysis pooled both groups rather than treating them separately.

Results

The responses came from 382 caregivers and 216 children. In most cases, dog care appeared to be [women's work](#), with half the women being 45-54 years old. For just under half, this was their first dog. Two-thirds said they researched their decision before acquiring a puppy.

More than half the families got a dog to boost their spirits and bring joy back into the house. Over half the children in the study were female, with a median age of 13. Slightly less than a quarter of caregivers had children with a [mental health](#) diagnosis, with 82% of these blaming the pandemic, in part.

Demanding Task

A third of caregivers found living with a puppy more challenging than expected, especially when it was their [first dog](#). The greatest challenge was ensuring everyone remained safe around the dog, especially the children.

Other challenges included always looking after the dog, especially when other family members were less involved. Some mothers felt their children were less involved in [dog walking](#) and feeding, though others noted more involvement than anticipated. First-time dog owners were more likely to find their children less involved in care than expected.

Safety First

Many caregivers reported stress involved in ensuring safe [dog-child interactions](#). Concerningly, over half of the children were permitted to engage in multiple activities known to increase bite risk (17/25 listed interactions). About half the children had eight risky interactions with the family pet. For instance, children not only patted their dogs but hugged and kissed them in 90% or more families. Over a third of families allowed children to play with the dog during its mealtimes, a known risk for biting behavior. Obvious misbehavior, like pulling the dog's ears or tail, was allowed in <7% of families.

Conclusion

"These findings underscore the importance of involving all household members in human-dog research and highlight the unpredictability of whether acquisition motivations will align with outcomes." "[Pandemic puppies](#)" did not always improve the mental health of the children in the families that owned them, and this should not be the reason for getting a puppy.

Children often love having a dog as a companion and playmate, but they should be trained to avoid behaviors that increase [dog bite risk](#). Families need access to resources to help them safely settle in the new puppy, especially considering the additional caregiver mental burden placed on the woman who typically undertakes dog care and maintains safe dog-child boundaries, in addition to her other responsibilities in the home.

Source:

<https://www.news-medical.net/news/20250923/How-pandemic-puppies-changed-childrens-mental-health-and-family-life.aspx>