

## THE EFFECT OF PET RABBITS ON THE PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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*Abstract:* A survey was carried out among high school students in Jasz-Nagykun-Szolnok County, Hungary. The aim of the work was to get information on the effects of pet rabbit keeping on the development of personality of young people. Data were gathered with a questionnaire in four different type high schools (n=322). The questions were focused on how can facilitate the proximity and the constant care of an animal the process of gaining knowledge and the development of mental and emotional capability. The girls were more persistent and pet rabbits had a slightly greater influence on their emotional development.

*Key words:* petrabbit, rabbit keeping, personality development, animal assisted education

### INTRODUCTION

The attachment to animals goes back to the early history of mankind [16]. According to biophilia theory, there is an evolutionary explanation for the beneficial effects of animals on humans. Although "companion animal" is in fact a category that has existed for hundreds of years, its content has changed considerably over time. Nowadays, it covers a relationship of a very different quality and with different socio-psychological characteristics than it was 40-50 years ago. In the 1980s we have witnessed a major shift in attitudes from the United States. The point is that pet animal keepers are increasingly treating the animal as a true companion, a "full-fledged" partner integrated into their own social networking system, virtually a family member [13].

The beginning of animal assisted therapies can be considered as 1919. Then, at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Washington, animals were also involved in a mental health program. Later, during the Second World War, this method was used for the psychological rehabilitation of injured soldiers. The real breakthrough was the accidental discovery of psychiatrist Levinson [8] at Yeshiva University (USA), who was able to connect more easily with more reserved children in the presence of his dog.

Animal assisted therapy is a method of complementary treatment in the rehabilitation of many human conditions. The rabbit can be used as a therapy animal and complementary therapy for different diseases. The rabbit is a, human friendly, intelligent and playful small pet animal [10].

At the University of Kaposvár the results of two decades were compared, in which study they sought answers to questions such as how can school education influence the emotional world, especially empathy, tolerance, aggression, positive attitude towards family and school? Research result in Somogy County is alarming. In the lives of children, the family-school-media order turned and the media and the internet is taking the lead role in emotions today [14, 12].

Pet husbandry is a worldwide and very accepted phenomenon in nowadays society. E.g. the British people now share their homes with millions of pets. These animals can play a huge role in their owners' lives, and providing companionship, support and recreation [15].

Animal Assisted Activity (AAA) performed by professionals with the help of animals. This activity is primarily for the participants (mainly healthy people) improvement in quality of life: raising awareness and education. Another form of activity is Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT), which deals with theraising of the physical, visual, cognitive, and social functions of the clients [3]. Positive changes in the emotional state

were induced by the therapeutic animal. The participants acquired new knowledge and skills. Socialization and group cohesion have improved [17].

The impact analysis of out-of-school learning was carried out by Rickinson et al. [11] and specified four main categories: affective, social/interpersonal, cognitive, and behavioral. Out-of-school learning places (science center, visual laboratory, zoo or library) complement school education and create a context in which multiple forms of learning are present at the same time. These venues are capable of arousing students' interest and contributing to an easier understanding of abstract knowledge while developing individual responsibility in their later studies. Eshach [4] in his study comparing school and out-of-school learning, also points out that these out-of-school visits significantly strengthen attitudes towards science in girls. It is important to emphasize that in extra-curricular settings students can experience science without the need for performance. In order to be understood and get to know by as many people as possible, they must be disseminated through school and other forms of education [6, 7].

The field of pet therapy within the milieu of the normal school environment is imperative, especially in the modern environment where many children are growing up in stressful circumstances [1].

The rabbit assisted intervention in a kindergarten is feasible, almost costless and does not require professional personnel. The rabbit is a well-liked animal, familiar to children, so the intervention can be successful and effective, providing the possibility to children get to know and become accustomed to animals [9].

In the recent research we primarily looked for the answer to the extent to which pet husbandry influences high school students' habits, biological knowledge, and the impact of caring for small animals on their personality development. The results of our research may also shed light on the development of a new or partially used teaching method the animal assisted education.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data were collected by paper and on-line questionnaires in four high schools (Karcagi Nagykun Református Gimnázium: n=100, Varró István Szakgimnázium: n=89, Móricz Zsigmond Református Gimnázium: n=89, Kenderesi Mezőgazdasági Szakgimnázium: n=44) in Jász-Nagykun-szolnok County. The first group of questions were about the students' gender, location and type of living. The questions about the effects about their pet rabbit keeping were about: endurance, sense of responsibility, the love of the animals, attention to the animal, pleasure, relief of anxiety, learning empathy, fear of animals and changes in behaviour. Beside the closed and open questions a 5-point Likert-scale was used to collect data on the students' habits, personality attitudes, and biological knowledge.

The data obtained from the questionnaire were evaluated by correlation and cross-table analysis using IBM SPSS 25 statistical software package.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Due to the low number of the sample the result of the survey is not representative, but it is a good preliminary result for planning further investigations.

38.8% of the total number of respondents has or had pet rabbit and 57.6% of them were female. The students were 11.9 years old in average when they got their first rabbit (the youngest was 3 years old). They got it most often for Easter and birthday. The shortest time was 5 days while it was held by a respondent, however, some were given at the age of 12 years and they still keep rabbits to this day.

When evaluating responses using a Likert-scale, it was found that some characteristics were typically given high values (Table 1) (respondent was delighted and

loves the animal) and other effects were not considered as significant (rabbit could be dangerous to the holder and nobody is afraid of rabbits).

**Table 1.**

**The average assessment of the effects of keeping rabbits (n=125)**

Description	Mean	Std. Deviation
Has rabbit-keeping influenced your agenda?	2.38	1.262
Has rabbit farming enriched your biological knowledge?	3.03	1.418
Did you increase your sense of responsibility?	3.46	1.489
Did the rabbit influence your behavior?	2.52	1.517
Were you persistent in taking care of the rabbit?	3.94	1.200
Have you had a positive impact on your personality?	3.82	1.346
You approached the animal with love?	4.24	1.266
Did you play with the animal?	3.98	1.314
Did you enjoy your pet?	4.13	1.218
Did it help you learn and get to know your surroundings?	2.98	1.234
Did you pay attention to the animal, its behavior, its feelings?	3.76	1.214
Have you played less with your PC/phone?	3.31	1.405
Did the animal help you with your communication skills?	2.42	1.335
Did the animal relieve stress or anxiety?	3.14	1.485
Did it help you "learn" empathy, tolerance?	3.07	1.351
Do you consider rabbit keeping dangerous to your health?	2.00	1.257
Were you afraid of the animal?	1.74	1.282
Have you maintained a personal relationship with others because of your common hobby?	2.42	1.416
Did you ask for help with your pet?	3.26	1.290

The closeness of the correlations between traits was characterized by the correlation coefficient and only those are presented where the correlation can be considered as significant.

There was no statistically significant correlation between the type of school, the type of settlement, the nature of housing and the characteristics examined.

Respondents' gender showed a correlation with several characteristics examined (Table 2).

The boys kept the rabbits for a shorter period the girls were tougher.

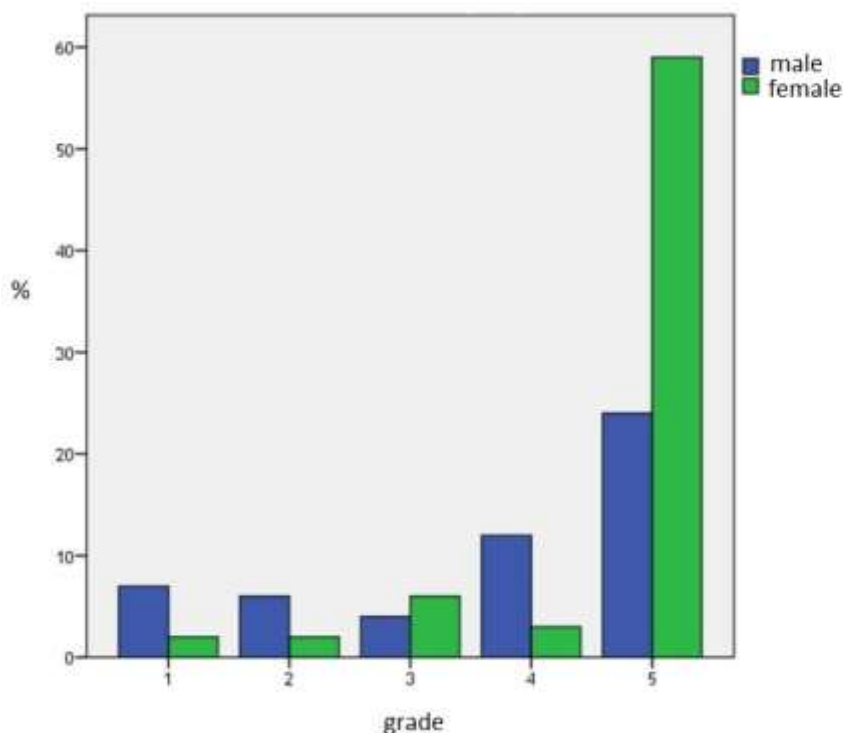
The high degree of love for animals characterized the majority of girls, and the girls were also more pleased and rabbits relieved of their anxiety.

The relationship created by the common hobby usually received few points, but among the girls it was generally less common.

**Table 2**

**Relationship between gender and certain characteristics**

Description	Correlation coefficient	Significance level
It kept for how long?	0.330	p<0.01
Were you persistent?	0.196	p<0.05
You approached the animal with love?	0.373	p<0.01
Did you enjoy your pet?	0.303	p<0.01
Did the animal relieve stress or anxiety?	0.211	p<0.05
Have you maintained a personal relationship with others because of your common hobby?	0.210	p<0.05

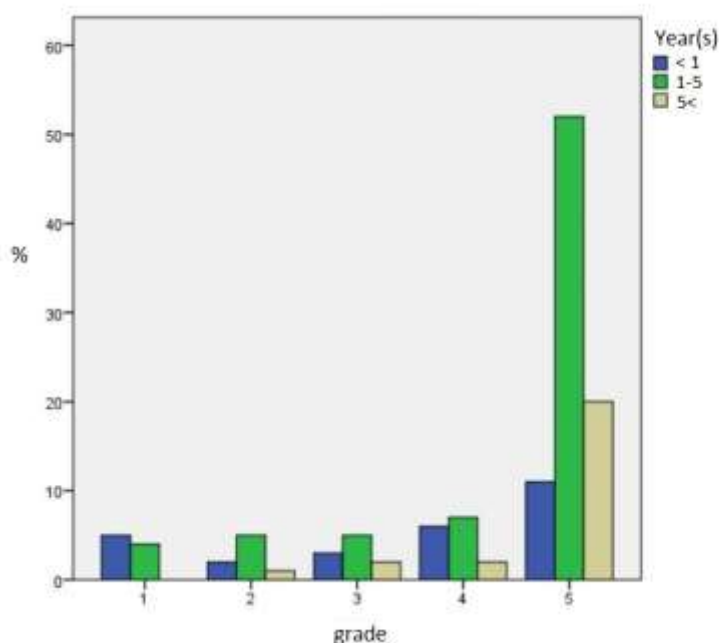


**Figure 1. The degree of affection among the students**

*Source: own data*

Further correlations:

- who like the rabbit better keep it longer ( $r = 0.280$ );
- who keep rabbit longer feels positive about their personality ( $r = 0.201$ );
- those who kept it longer preferred to play (deal with) the rabbit ( $r = 0.214$ ) (Figure 2);
- those who found pleasure in dealing with rabbits they willingly agreed to continue maintain animals ( $r = 0.354$ );
- who kept it longer helped them better in learning ( $r = 0.240$ );
- who held rabbit longer payed more attention on the animal ( $r = 0.222$ );
- the more time spent with the animal strengthened the sense of responsibility ( $r = 0.381$ ), developed the communication skills ( $r = 0.358$ ) and decreased students' anxiety to a greater extent ( $r = 0.329$ );



**Figure 2: Evaluating the time spent with playing compared to the holding time**

*Source: own data*

## CONCLUSIONS

There was a difference by the gender of students. The girls kept pet rabbit longer and reported more positive effects. The result is similar to the experiences of Bjerke et al. [2] who also found gender differences: girls preferred horse and riding while the boys privileged hunting and fishing as hobby.

The keeping of pet rabbits seems to have positive effect on several traits of personality similarly to Fine's finding where the care of an animal gave the opportunity to learn empathy and responsibility.

Our preliminary results are not representative and show weak to moderate correlations, but provide a good basis for refining the questionnaire and continuing the research.

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