

Researcher reveals the truth about cats and dogs

Ask most pet owners, and they will tell you they love their pets. So why is it that every year in Australia around 400,000 cats and dogs are surrendered to animal shelters or pounds?

UQ psychologist and postgraduate student Tamzin Barber has been working to discover what makes some owners progress from the enthusiasm of adopting a new cat or dog, to the decision of having to give the animal up – and she may have found the answer.

"Preliminary results indicate that pet owners who have to give away their pets, generally do care for their pet and are attached to their pet," Ms Barber said.

"However, there appears to be a discrepancy between what they would have liked their pet to be like, and what their pet was actually like.

"This is interesting because it can indicate why owners may have taken on the pet and how the relationship with the pet could have broken down if the owner's expectations were not met."

The results emerged after Ms Barber examined a number of factors involved in the decision to give up a pet, including the health and behaviour of the surrendered or abandoned animal, as well as the owner's knowledge, bond with the pet and expectations of the pet's behaviour.

Ms Barber said her research highlighted just how important it was for prospective owners to be well-informed before taking on the responsibility of a new pet.

"This [research] leaves room for an intervention strategy to be employed with new or `would-be` pet owners, where they can identify what they expect from their pet and be educated on how these expectations may or may not be met and which types of pets would be best suited to them," she said.

"The matching of the person to pet before adoption is critical, I believe, and along with early age desexing, could help reduce the numbers of unwanted pets."

Ms Barber said while for a lot of owners giving up a pet may be a last resort, many of the reasons that combined to force this outcome could be nullified if new pet owners were better educated about their pets.

"When looking at cats, many litters of unwanted kittens end up in shelters," she said.

"People genuinely believe that allowing their cat or dog to have a litter before being spayed is best for the animal.

"This is just not true, and may account for the great numbers of unwanted kittens ending up in shelters."

In any given year, just over half the dogs, but only one third of the cats that end up in animal shelters or pounds are adopted. Sadly, the rest of these pets must be destroyed – a figure Ms Barber is working to address.

"This current research I hope will bring some attention to the relationship we have with our pets and ultimately reduce the number of cats and dogs that are given up," Ms Barber said.

"This in turn will reduce the numbers of innocent animals that are killed simply for being unwanted."

Source: University of Queensland

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