# Rising dog ownership linked to historic low birth rates in the UK and beyond



A notable shift in societal norms surrounding family and nurturing is emerging, as a recent study suggests a direct relationship between declining birth rates and rising dog ownership. In many parts of Europe, North America, and East Asia, people are increasingly opting for canine companionship as a substitute for the traditional path of parenthood. Researchers from Eötvös Loránd University in Hungary assert that this trend might be driven by individuals seeking the emotional fulfilment associated with nurturing, yet without the substantial demands of raising children.

As of 2023, the UK's birth rate has dropped to a historic low of 1.44 children per woman, with projections indicating it could decline further to 1.41 by 2027. This decline is stark compared to other G7 nations, where the average fertility rate has not experienced such a sharp decrease in the past decade. In this context, the increasing popularity of dog ownership appears to fill a void. The researchers affirm that a significant portion of households across various European countries now owns at least one dog, effectively transforming some pets into family members akin to children.

The paper published in **European Psychologist** raises a compelling question: are dogs now replacing children? The findings highlight how many dog owners experience emotional bonds and fulfil parental instincts through their pets, which can offer a sense of purpose similar to that derived from parenting. Laura Gillet, a PhD student at the university, notes that despite dogs being much dependent on their owners, many view the commitments associated with dog ownership as less burdensome compared to those of raising a child. This perspective might be influenced by the dogs’ shorter lifespans; most people expect to outlive their pets, creating a sense of emotional security.

However, this growing trend raises ethical concerns. The researchers caution against the potential for viewing dogs strictly as substitutes for children, which can lead to overprotective behaviours or the breeding of unhealthy dog breeds. Eniko Kubinyi, the senior author of the research, emphasises that, contrary to popular belief, only a minority of dog owners treat their pets as children. Most owners appreciate the unique species-specific traits of dogs and seek companionship that does not mirror the demands of parenting.

While ownership of pets appears to meet the instinctual desires to nurture and care, it has also been noted that high levels of pet attachment might reduce fertility intentions. Some studies, particularly in regions like China, are finding that individuals with strong emotional attachments to their pets tend to exhibit lower intentions to have children, especially among those with higher socioeconomic status. This insight reinforces the notion that the dynamics of caregiving and emotional connections are shifting in contemporary society, with implications that may shape future family structures and societal values.

In conclusion, as societal norms evolve, the rise in dog ownership could be seen as both a symptom and a response to changing fertility patterns. The blending of companionship and emotional fulfilment through pets signifies a new avenue of family life, one that raises important questions about nurturing, attachment, and the future of human relationships with pets.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/dog-ownership-child-surrogate-fertility-b2756506.html), [[2]](https://phys.org/news/2025-03-dogs-children-birth-dog-ownership.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/dog-ownership-child-surrogate-fertility-b2756506.html), [[3]](https://www.tun.com/home/are-dogs-replacing-children-new-study-offers-an-explanation/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/dog-ownership-child-surrogate-fertility-b2756506.html), [[3]](https://www.tun.com/home/are-dogs-replacing-children-new-study-offers-an-explanation/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/dog-ownership-child-surrogate-fertility-b2756506.html), [[6]](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0003996820300190)
* Paragraph 5 – [[4]](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0003996820300190), [[5]](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0003996820300190)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/dog-ownership-child-surrogate-fertility-b2756506.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://phys.org/news/2025-03-dogs-children-birth-dog-ownership.html> - A study from Eötvös Loránd University in Hungary examines the connection between rising dog ownership and declining birth rates. The research suggests that the increase in dog ownership is linked to a transformation in social networks and caregiving instincts, rather than dogs replacing children. The study highlights that many individuals view their dogs as family members, fulfilling emotional needs and providing a sense of purpose similar to parenting, but with fewer demands than raising biological offspring.
3. <https://www.tun.com/home/are-dogs-replacing-children-new-study-offers-an-explanation/> - This article discusses a study from Eötvös Loránd University in Hungary, published in the journal Current Directions in Psychological Science, which explores the relationship between rising dog ownership and declining birth rates. The study suggests that the increase in dog ownership is linked to a transformation in social networks and caregiving instincts, rather than dogs replacing children. The research highlights that many individuals view their dogs as family members, fulfilling emotional needs and providing a sense of purpose similar to parenting, but with fewer demands than raising biological offspring.
4. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0003996820300190> - This study examines the relationship between pet attachment and fertility intention among childbearing-aged individuals in China. The research found that individuals with high pet attachment were less likely to have fertility intentions, especially among those with high subjective socioeconomic status. The study suggests that pet attachment may influence fertility intentions, with the effect moderated by individuals' perceived socioeconomic status.
5. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0003996820300190> - This study examines the relationship between pet attachment and fertility intention among childbearing-aged individuals in China. The research found that individuals with high pet attachment were less likely to have fertility intentions, especially among those with high subjective socioeconomic status. The study suggests that pet attachment may influence fertility intentions, with the effect moderated by individuals' perceived socioeconomic status.
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