

## **An Investigation into the Perspective Taking Skills of 6-Year-Old Children in Terms of Pet Feeding and Gender Variables**

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**Abstract:** This research has been designed in order to investigate the perspective taking skills of 6-year-old children in terms of the variables 'pet feeding at home' and 'gender'. 100 six-year-old children attending nursery schools participated in the research. Data were collected through a "Personal Information Form" and the "Perspective Taking Test". In analyzing the data, t-test was applied. As a result of the analysis, it has been determined that the status of pet feeding has an impact on the perceptual perspective taking skills of children ( $p < 0.05$ ) and the gender of the child has an impact on the cognitive perspective taking skills ( $p < 0.01$ ). Consequently, some recommendations have been made.

**Key words:** Pet % gender % perspective taking

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Young children learn about their environments through experiencing and thus sensory-motor learning develops by interaction resulting in influencing one another, where pets become important. Pets, which make up part of human life, become ideal friends for children. The feeling of loneliness in the pre-school period or for older children attending school is lessened to a very low level or it disappears thanks to pets [1].

Pets get into a child's life through toys, starting at birth. Plush stuffed animal toys, ducks swimming in the bath tub, motorized walking and talking toys are continuously in the life of a child. A special teddy bear or a doll can become the second best friend of a child, after the mother. Pets are also influential in a child's life. With a pet, a child can practice how to communicate with people and how to socialize, can share his happiness or unhappiness, as well as eliminating his anger by speaking loudly with the animal. Pets help a child develop the sense of responsibility. Through his relationship with a pet, the child learns the basics of human relations such as loving, protecting and becoming a self-sufficient independent individual. Pets can assume the function of sharing for the child [2].

Pets provide a bridge between children and the outer world by supporting their emotional development. Pets play an important role in children's life in the formation and reinforcement of the concepts of love and devotion; in providing emotional and non-verbal learning; in the development of responsibility and capabilities; in learning the concepts of life and death; in the development of perspective taking skills; and for physical and mental health [1, 3, 4]. Children believe that animals understand them and that they can share some of their problems with animals. Animals unconditionally love children without judging them so children can easily share their daily problems with animals [5].

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The physical, intellectual, psychological and social development of the child is completed in integrity, each kind of development by more or less influencing each other. The child first perceives of himself and the outer world through his five senses and then learns by imitating and interacting with what he has sensed. Particularly the question of with whom, how and how frequently the interaction takes place strongly influences his intellectual, psychological and social development. The important people in this relation are primarily his mother and other family members and then people in his near and far circles. Pets also have an important place in the social circle of the child. Given that pets strengthen the communication of the child with his social environment, it is obvious that the perspective taking skill will also benefit this positive communication [6].

Perspective taking skills are formed from perceptual (to be aware of what another person sees), cognitive (to be aware of what another person thinks) and emotional (to be aware of how another feels) elements. The evaluation of the perspective taking skill in childhood from a social point of view provides that the child needs healthy parent and educator attitudes and that it is important to establish an empathetic environment for the child [7-13]. Perspective taking is also defined as the emotional reactions shared in the experience of the child against the emotional reactions of the other person. Perspective taking includes both cognitive understanding of another person's experience (playing a role) and the emotional understanding of another person's emotional situation (experiencing). A person with the perspective taking ability can feel the other's emotions after defining his emotion and perspective partially [7, 14-16].

Some research has established that pets are good friends for children; hence, children can get engaged into non-verbal communication in this way, meeting their needs and establishing friendship ties with pets; even some children with communication difficulty opened out to the outside world in this way [3, 4]. It has been asserted that children feeding pets at home have a lesser degree of sense of fear and that they are more confident; as they grow up, the kinds of animals they are scared of become fewer; and that there is no significant difference between the genders and the kinds of animals scared of [1]. There are studies which concluded that there is not a correlation between the concept of identity and pet feeding and that there is a meaningful correlation between pet feeding and developing positive behaviour [17, 18]. In some other research, on the other hand, it has been shown that the perspective taking skill develops with age, children's ability to imitate increases as they are affected by animal behaviour, young children succeed in understanding the feelings of other people, perceptual perspective taking increases with the level of class; and child-raising attitudes, age and gender play an important role in perspective taking [7, 19-24]. Animals have been used as part of the education model in the lessons regarding the communication skills of children; and as a result, it has been determined that animals help children develop the concepts of love, tenderness and empathy [25]. Children of 3 to 6 years of age and who have pets participated in a study to examine whether their relationship with animals have an impact on their development or not. The results revealed that there is an important correlation between the level of the relationship of children with their pets and their level of empathy [26].

When the literature is reviewed carefully, it can be asserted that research on pet feeding and the perspective taking skill of the child is inadequate. It is believed that the communication established with pets can be influential on the perspective taking skills of the child. Moreover, conducted research has revealed that gender has effects on perspective taking skills. For these reasons, this piece of research has aimed to determine whether the gender of the child and his pet feeding status result in a difference in his perspective taking skills or not.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Participants:** The field of the survey is Ankara, Turkey and involves 6-year-old children attending kindergartens affiliated to the Ministry of National Education.

The study sampling comprises 100 children randomly selected among 6-year-old children attending Atatürk Nursery School, Dr. Ufuk Ege Nursery School and Batıkent Nursery School affiliated to the Ministry of National Education. Children living with their mothers and fathers who voluntarily participated in the study are in the scope of this research.

**Instruments:** The following instruments have been used to collect data: a “Personal Information Form” to gather information about the child and the family, the “Perspective Taking Test” to determine the perspective taking skills of children.

To measure the three separate dimensions of the perspective taking skill, the “Perspective Taking Test (Perceptual Perspective Taking Test, Cognitive Perspective Taking Test, Emotional Perspective Taking Test)” that was developed by Öener [27] and tested for validity and reliability by Akın [28] was used. This measurement instrument was prepared as inspired by the study conducted by Kurdek and Rodgon in 1975. For the validity of the instruments used for perceptual, cognitive and emotional perspective taking and for the instructions given to the children, peer review has been taken and the specialists have confirmed the appropriacy of the instruments [27]. Akın [28] conducted the validity and reliability study on the “Perspective Taking Test (Perceptual Perspective Taking Test, Cognitive Perspective Taking Test, Emotional Perspective Taking Test)”. In the Perceptual Perspective Taking Test, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was determined as  $r = 0.7749$  and the test-retest reliability as  $r=0.60$ . In the Cognitive Perspective Taking Test, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was determined as  $r =0.8457$  and the test-retest reliability as  $r=0.45$ . Finally, for the Emotional Perspective Taking Test, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was found to be  $r =0.773$  and the test-retest reliability to be  $r=0.60$ .

In the Perceptual Perspective Taking Test, two round cushions with the face of Mickey Mouse on them have been used. In the Cognitive Perspective Taking Test, there are seven picture cards, describing a child chasing a dog. And in the Emotional Perspective Taking Test, there are four picture cards, describing happy, sad, scared and angry facial expressions. A total of four points is granted for each successful situation in each sub-test.

**Procedure:** The nursery school principals were met before applying the the “Perspective Taking Test (Perceptual Perspective Taking Test, Cognitive Perspective Taking Test, Emotional Perspective Taking Test)” on children and the Personal Information Form and the Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B on parents. During the application of the Perspective Taking Test, the children were taken individually to a quiet room decided by the teacher. The children who did not want to participate in the application were not forced to do so. No intervals were given between the three tests so that the child is not distracted from the study or his attention is diverted. The tests were applied by the researchers on the children individually. The assessments were made at the end of the test for each child. The Personal Information Form were applied to the parents in a meeting held at the school.

**Data analysis:** The analyses were made by using the SPSS statistical software (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) on the children’s points received from “the “Perspective Taking Test (Perceptual Perspective Taking Test, Cognitive Perspective Taking Test, Emotional Perspective Taking Test)” and the data obtained from the Personal Information Form. For unrelated samplings, t-test was used to investigate the effect of the bivariate factors on the average points received from the sub-tests of the Perspective taking test (Perceptual Perspective taking test, Cognitive Perspective taking test, Emotional Perspective taking test); t-test for unrelated samplings is used to test whether the difference between the averages of the two unrelated samplings is significant or not [29].

**Findings:** The findings of this research that has aimed to determine whether the gender of 6-year-old children and their pet feeding status have an impact on their perspective taking skills or not are provided below.

**Table 1:** In Table 1, it is notable that the average grade received from the perceptual perspective taking skill test ( $O= 3.62$ ) is higher in pet feeding children than that of the children who do not have pets ( $O= 3.25$  ). Accordingly, it has been concluded that the status of pet feeding causes a difference on the perceptual dimension of the perspective taking skill test [ $t(98)= 2.08, p<.05$ ].

Table 1: The average points received, the standard deviation and t-test results regarding the Perceptual, Cognitive and Emotional Perspective Taking Test according to the pet feeding status of the children participated in the research

Perspective taking	Pet feeding status	N	O	S	Sd	T	p
Perceptual perspective taking	Feeding	40	3.62	0.97			
	Not feeding	60	3.25	1.01	98	2.08	0.040*
Cognitive perspective taking	Feeding	40	2.35	0.83			
	Not feeding	60	2.16	0.90	98	1.04	0.301
Emotional perspective taking	Feeding	40	2.85	0.94			
	Not feeding	60	2.73	1.00	98	0.58	0.558

\*p<.05

Table 2: The average points received, the standard deviation and t-test results regarding the Perceptual, Cognitive and Emotional Perspective Taking Test according to the gender of the children participated in the research

Perspective taking	Gender	N	O	S	Sd	T	p
Perceptual perspective taking	Girl	53	3.37	0.98			
	Boy	47	3.42	0.90	98	0.25	0.799
Cognitive perspective taking	Girl	53	2.47	0.74			
	Boy	47	1.97	0.94	98	2.86	0.005*
Emotional perspective taking	Girl	53	2.84	0.90			
	Boy	47	2.70	1.06	98	0.73	0.462

\*p<.01

Poresky ve Hendrix [30] compared the empathy skills of 3-to-6-year-old children who feed pets with those who do not. They established that the empathy points of pet feeding children are higher and that they have healthier personality traits compared with the children in the group who do not feed pets. The results of this study appear to be in line with the results of our research.

According to Köksal [31], in empathy establishment, it is of primary importance that a person can put himself in another's place and perceptual perspective taking means an individual's putting himself in the other's place. It is important to be able to take on the other's role before understanding that person's emotions or thoughts. In children's interaction with animals, their being able to put themselves in the animal's place is important for them to understand whether the animal is hungry or not, whether they are hurt or not, or else whether they want to be taken care of or not. The perceptual perspective skills of pet feeding children can have resulted high for this reason.

**Table 2:** As can be seen in Table 2, the average grade of the girls received from the cognitive perspective taking skill test is  $X = 2.47$  and the average grade of the boys is  $X = 1.97$ . Examining the table shows that gender causes a significant difference on the cognitive dimension [ $t(98) = 2.84, p < .01$ ] of the perspective taking skill test; while it does not cause a difference on the perceptual [ $t(98) = 0.25, p > .05$ ] and emotional [ $t(98) = 0.73, p > .05$ ] dimensions.

It has been asserted in some studies that girls are more empathetic than boys [32-36]. Other studies, on the other hand, indicate that gender does not cause differences in perspective taking (empathy) but the empathetic skills of girls are higher than those of the boys [31, 37-42].

## RECOMMENDATIONS

When the results of the research are taken into account, it can be seen that the pet feeding status affects the perspective taking skill of the child significantly. At this point, it is clear that pet feeding is necessary and important in

children's life. The communication skills of pet feeding children improve and their perspective taking skills are affected positively. Parents can attach importance to the relationship of the child with the animal and support the love and interest of their child. Children's love for animals can be developed through visual mass communication tools and the media, by allocating more space for animal related publications and broadcasting. In nursery schools, the open and closed areas spared for pets can be expanded and different species of animals can be fed.

In further research, impacts of pet feeding on perspective taking skills of children at different ages can be studied. While studying the pet feeding and perspective taking skills, research on the effects of the variables such as the child's age, the species of the animal or the intensity of the child's interaction with the animal on perspective taking skills can be planned. Studies on the effects of feeding a pet on the relations of the child with his siblings or friends can be conducted.

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