

---

UCF Forum

---

8-19-2020

## Pets Are Not People

Jeff Kunerth  
Jeff.Kunerth@ucf.edu

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum>

Information presented on this website is considered public information (unless otherwise noted) and may be distributed or copied. Use of appropriate byline/photo/image credit is requested. We recommend that UCF data be acquired directly from a UCF server and not through other sources that may change the data in some way. While UCF makes every effort to provide accurate and complete information, various data such as names, telephone numbers, etc. may change prior to updating.

---

### STARS Citation

Kunerth, Jeff, "Pets Are Not People" (2020). *UCF Forum*. 414.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/414>

This Opinion column is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in UCF Forum by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).



## Pets Are Not People

By Jeff Kunerth  
UCF Forum columnist  
Wednesday, August 19, 2020

People who treat pets as surrogate children expect the world to do the same. That's because, in many ways, we love dogs the same as we love children.



My grandchild is a dog. She is a 1½-year-old Boston Terrier named Margo. My son tells Margo how much he loves her, that she's his baby, that she's the youngest in our family.

He praises Margo when she's good, admonishes her when she's bad, sends her to timeout when she's incorrigible. She is, in most every way, his child.

To Margo, I'm Grandpa and my wife is Grandma.

Neither of my adult children have children. Their reasoning is the same as many in their generation: the expense, the responsibility, the catastrophe of climate change.

"Who would want to bring a child into this world?" my son says.

We've become a nation of pet owners instead of parents. Nearly 85 million American households have dogs. Only 35 million have children.

With that reasoning, we've become a nation of pet owners instead of parents. Nearly 85 million American households have dogs. Only 35 million have children. There are about 4 million babies and 6 million puppies born in the U.S. every year.

Americans spend \$3.6 billion on their dogs every year. Babies R Us goes bust, while PetSmart expands.

The birthrate in America is the lowest it's been since 1986, an alarming stat according to University of Southern California demographer Dowell Myers: "Birthrate is a barometer of despair...Young people won't have babies unless they are optimistic about the future."

Instead of raising children, we become "paw parents" to "fur babies." If we have both dogs and kids, the pets become "dog-brothers" in what some experts are calling "interspecies families."

Many of us have both pets and children and in many ways we treat them the same. When I call my dog, I say "Come to Daddy." We take the dogs to the dog park the same way we took our children to the playground. We buy them toys. Sometimes we dress them up for the holidays, same as we did our children for Halloween. We feed them chicken off our plates. We take them with us on family vacations. When we don't bring them along, we worry about how they are doing in the kennel or with the dog-sitter.

According to one survey, 80 percent of pet owners care for their pets like kids, 79 percent believe pets should eat the same food as people and 50 percent clothe their pets.

People who treat pets as surrogate children expect the world to do the same. They demand — and get — pet-friendly restaurants and businesses, doggy daycares, and motels that accept dogs. Some become indignant with places that allow children, but not dogs.

And that's because, in many ways, we love dogs the same as we love children. When they are happy, we are happy. When they hurt, we hurt. When we are lonely, they provide companionship.

But it is a mistake to equate animals to people. Transferring our affection to pets does not — cannot — replace or equate a parent’s love for a child. When a dog dies, we grieve. Our grief is real and deep. But then we can buy another dog. When a child dies, the grief is everlasting. It can’t be lessened by having another child. Or buying another pet.

Pets are not people, even if we pretend they are.

“We love them because they aren’t human, then spend their lives treating them like people,” writes author M.A. Wallace in *New York Magazine*. “We don’t really want them to be animals — wild, free, ultimately unknowable. We want them to be like us, but more static and predictable.”

The goal of being a parent is to raise your children to be independent, self-sufficient adults. We raise them to leave. The purpose of having a pet is to have something that remains attached to you, and you to them, until death.

As dog-owners, we expect to outlive our pets. As parents, our greatest fear is we will outlive our children.

Raising a dog is the opposite of being a parent.

As Wallace says, raising a pet is the ritual of parenthood without any of the purpose, consequences or hard work of having a child: “To call yourself a parent, you need to have kids.”

I have, begrudgingly, accepted that my children will never have children and I will never be some child’s Grandpa. I accept that I am the grandfather to a dog.

But when I see the depth of my son’s love and affection for Margo, I can’t help but think: You would have made a fantastic father.

Jeff Kunerth is a faculty member in UCF’s Nicholson School of Communication and Media. He can be reached at [Jeff.Kunerth@ucf.edu](mailto:Jeff.Kunerth@ucf.edu).

