



Evaluation of cat stress and human attachment to cats in families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder



Amanda Eshelman, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Missouri, Columbia

Rebecca A. Johnson, PhD, RN, FAAN, FNAP, Professor and Director, Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction, MU College of Veterinary Medicine

Gretchen K. Carlisle, PhD, MEd, RN, CHES, Research Scientist, MU Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction

Background

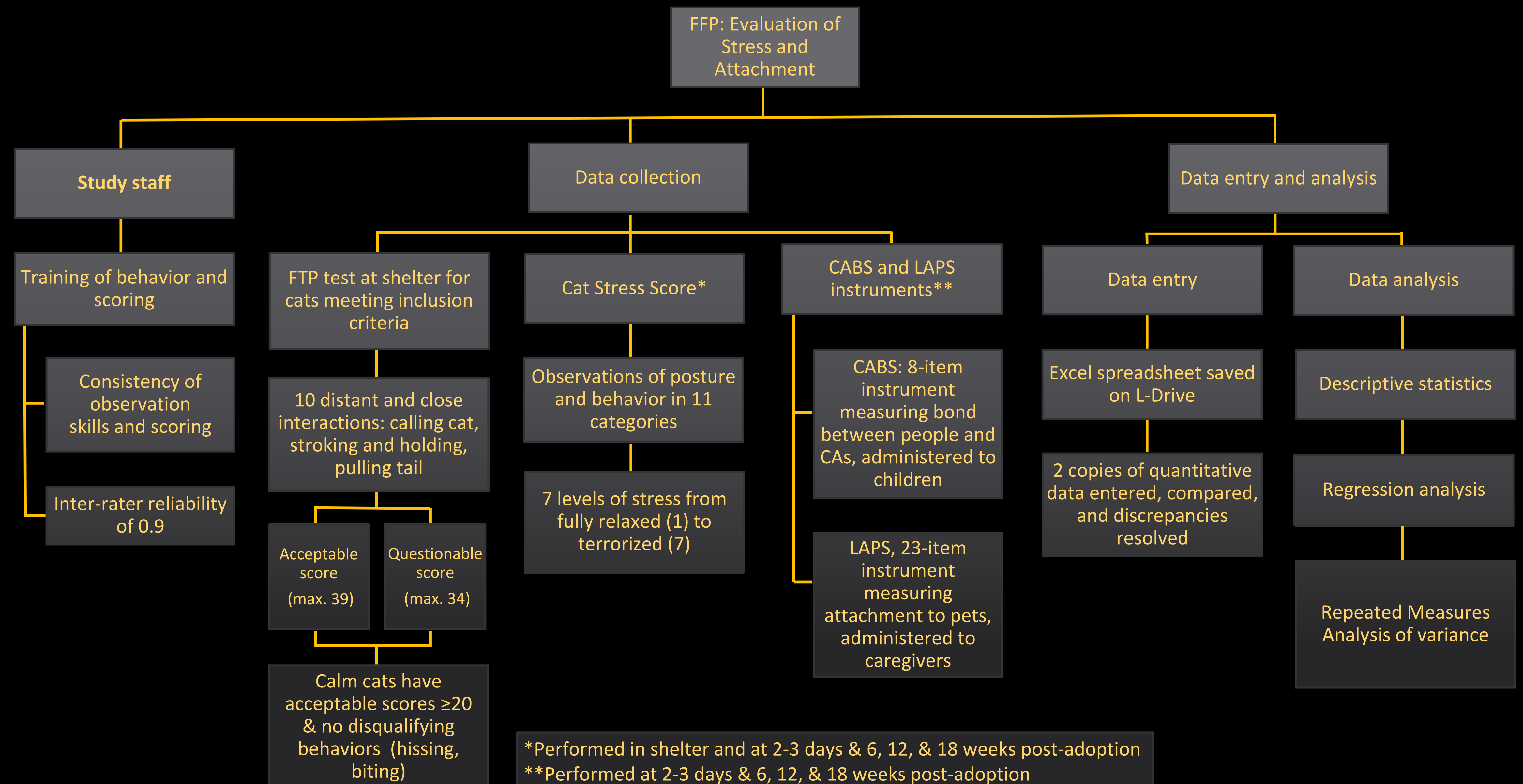
- Interaction with companion animals (CAs) has been shown to reduce anxiety and promote prosocial behavior in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Cats may be an ideal choice of CA due to their calm and quiet temperament, but stress can result in manifestation of undesirable behaviors
- Feline temperament may be predictive of cat stress and human attachment to shelter cats adopted by families of children with autism
- Feline Temperament Profile (FTP) scores sociability, aggressiveness and adaptability

Research Questions

To what extent is cat temperament associated with cat stress in shelter cats adopted by families of children with autism?

To what extent is cat temperament of adopted cats associated with attachment to cats by parents of children with ASD and the children?

Study Design



Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Description of Cats

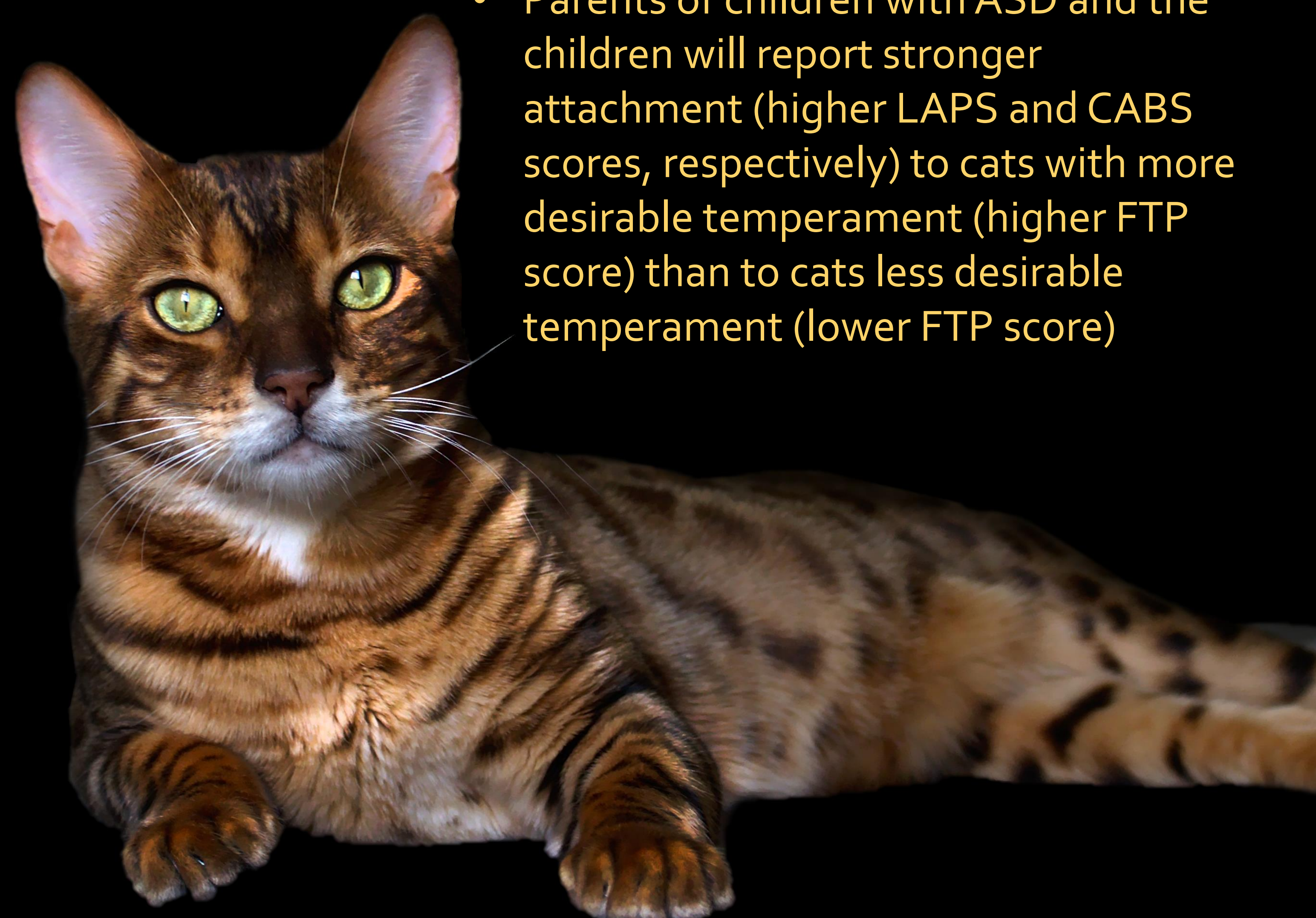
FTP score	Mean = 24.5
	SD = 2.79
	Range= 20-26
Age at adoption	Mean = 1.6 years
	SD = 1.00
	Range= 10 months-4 years

Table 2: Cat Stress Scores

	Mean	SD	Range
Shelter (n = 9)	2.56	1.01	1-4
2-3 days (n = 9)	2.44	1.13	1-5
6 weeks (n = 8)	2.25	0.46	2-3
12 weeks (n = 5)	2.4	1.08	1.5-4
18 weeks (n = 4)	1.38	0.48	1-2

Expected Results

- Cats with more desirable temperament (higher FTP score) will experience less stress (lower CSS and maintained body weight) following adoption by families of children with autism than cats with less desirable temperament (lower FTP score)
- Parents of children with ASD and the children will report stronger attachment (higher LAPS and CABS scores, respectively) to cats with more desirable temperament (higher FTP score) than to cats less desirable temperament (lower FTP score)



Discussion & Ongoing Studies

- No existing studies address the use of cats as CAs for children with ASD or stress experienced by these cats
- The ongoing Feline Friends study will also evaluate fecal cortisol concentration in cats, social skills and anxiety in children with ASD, and qualitative data
- Results have potential to offer families with a child with ASD vital information on selection of CAs and successful integration of a new CA into the family
- Adoption of shelter cats has potential to benefit children with ASD, their families, and the large population of abandoned cats available for adoption

Project made possible by:



Image credit Matt Hoskins