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Virtual pets have benefits

ANGUS THOMPSON

Virtual pets have come a long way from the days of the Tamagotchi – the egg-shaped, pocket-sized electronic pet that spawned a classroom craze in the late 1990s.

Tamagotchis may have represented the world's first baby step into the virtual pet phenomenon but it kickstarted an evolution of digital playtime pals – from the mogwai-like Furby doll and Sony's robodog AIBO, to the more recent Nintendogs videogame for Nintendo DS.

Sydney father of three Patrick Lagana has just welcomed a member of the latest generation of virtual pets into his home: an EyePet that comes to life in his living room via a Playstation 3 console.

His two older daughters, Mia, 3, and Grace, 5, have named it Daisy.

Lagana and his family interact with Daisy through a video camera, and appear on the television screen playing with it and teaching it new skills using so-called "augmented reality" technology.

"I kind of describe it as a cross between a monkey and a cat and a dog, all kind of rolled up in one.

"It's actually quite a cute little critter," says Lagana, who loves the concept of a pet that comes without the catches – no vet bills, chewed-up couches or poo to shovel in the backyard.

"The list of benefits for parents are endless ... (and) your kids can enjoy the interaction, companionship and social development skills it offers," says Lagana, who is also a marketing manager at Sony.

Child and adolescent psychologist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg says virtual pets can have some benefits.

Appropriate technology can help teach children learn problem-solving skills and values, he says.

"There's nothing wrong with having a virtual pet, I think it's a great preparation for having a real one," he says.

Lagana says that owning Daisy has taught his daughters the responsibilities of real pet ownership, which he and his wife are now strongly considering.

Although she doesn't die, if Daisy isn't fed she gets tired, and if she isn't bathed then fleas appear on the screen.

Lagana has also noticed one of his daughters is now less frightened to approach real animals.

"I have definitely found that she's a little less fearful of approaching animals," he says.

But Lisa Wood, a researcher at the University of Western Australia, says a virtual pet can never replace the real thing.

"I would say there are a number of benefits that are probably difficult (for a virtual pet) to replicate," says Wood, who recently published *Living Well Together*, a report on the benefits of pet ownership.

"It's getting people out walking in their neighbourhood, which has benefits for their health ... but it also has a social benefit.

"The social benefits of people meeting other neighbours and getting to know people in their neighbourhood through their pet."

Wood says pets teach children to care for something other than themselves, and that the loss of a pet is often a child's first experience of grief – an important part of preparing for adult life.

Carr-Gregg says it's a question of moderation.