Dog as Co-Counselor: Animal-Assisted Therapy as Part of the School Counseling Program

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Abstract

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is becoming increasingly popular in educational and therapeutic settings for children and adolescents. This paper reviews and evaluates the components of incorporating an AAT program into the school setting as part of the school counseling program. A review of literature reveals the history of AAT; benefits of animals, particularly dogs, in educational settings; specific animal interventions proven successful with students; limitations and barriers to AAT in schools; and future considerations for successful research and program implementation.
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Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) is becoming an increasingly common treatment in educational, psychotherapy, and health care settings. According to the 2013-2014 American Pet Products Association National Pet Owners Survey, 68% of American households own a pet (APPA, 2015). Currently there are approximately 70 million dogs living in American households. These statistics mean that mental health and school workers are very likely to work with families who have animals as members of their family system. It is natural, then, that the inclusion of animals is considered as part of an individual’s challenges, coping skills, and resilience factors (Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf, 2006). Relationships with animals lead to an enriched quality of life. “Ownership of dogs has significant long term cardiovascular benefits as well as other health benefits” (Somervill, Swanson, Robertson, Arnett, & MacLin, 2009, p. 111). Interaction with animals not only brings positive effects on people’s physical health, but on mental health, social and emotional well-being, and the social and emotional development of children (Faver & Cavazos Jr., 2008). Research finds that interactions with animals lower blood pressure, serum triglycerides, and cholesterol levels; contribute to the treatment of heart disease, dementia, and cancer; facilitate the recovery of children in hospitals; and alleviate depression and anxiety in AIDS patients, elderly adults, and those in hospice care (Walsh, 2009; Westgarth et al., 2013). Due to these findings, it is an ever expanding research field. Recognizing the impact of animals on human lives can, and should, significantly affect counselors’ abilities to help their students (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006). A number of studies support the benefits of work with animals for the general student population and exceptional children alike.
Animals are an important part of people’s social world. Animals have been prominent in science and literature for many years with sources including biologists, veterinarians, ethologists, researchers, writers, social scientists, mental health practitioners, photographers, and anyone who wants to share their passion, knowledge, and experiences with animals (VanFleet, 2008). Humans talk to animals and often refer to them as their children. Animals are an important source of comfort and love, emotional support, and people grieve when their pets die (Somervill et al., 2008; Faver & Cavazos Jr., 2008).

Animal-Assisted therapy has been successful in a variety of places including kindergartens, primary schools, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, mental health institutions, and nursing homes (Haubenhofer & Kirchengast, 2007). Research supports “the physiological, psychological, and social benefits of interactions with animals and the therapeutic potential of animal-assisted programs in a wide range of settings” (Walsh, 2009, p. 462). Throughout history, the importance of animals in the lives of humans has been well documented across cultures and in research. Unfortunately, attachments with animals is often undervalued and even pathologized in areas of mental health (Walsh, 2009). Animal-assisted therapy is not usually a stand-alone therapy, but a way to contribute to or augment other treatment strategies (Dietz, Davis, & Pennings, 2012).

Animals play an important role in the coping mechanisms of children at home. Children with animals show higher self-esteem, greater empathy, and more engagement with peers (VanFleet, 2008). Therapy dogs are an increasingly common sight with children and adolescents in educational settings. The overwhelming popularity of dogs in American homes suggests that the use of dogs in therapy would be well received (Eshbaugh, Somervill, Kotek, Perez, Nalan, Wilson, & Bullis, 2011). More than a third of dog owners report being closer to their dogs than
human family members and when experiencing emotional distress, children and adolescents are more likely to turn to their pet dogs than family members, friends, or other children (Ensminger, 2010; Geist, 2011). “The unique behavior of dogs makes them ideal companions, our best friends, and recently, or perhaps not so recently, our therapists” (Ensminger, 2010, p. 22).

This paper examines the use and benefits of animals, particularly dogs, in therapy and educational settings. The history and training requirements of therapy dogs, the unique bond between youths and animals, and Adlerian parallels in AAT are reviewed. The general benefits of AAT in schools are discussed, as are benefits to specific populations, programs, and counseling interventions. Limitations to AAT in school settings are considered as well as future applications and research.

Animals in Therapy

What is Animal-Assisted Therapy

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is an umbrella term that encompasses therapy, activities, and education under various terms such as: pet therapy, pet psychotherapy, pet-facilitated therapy, pet-facilitated psychotherapy, four-footed therapy, animal-facilitated counseling, pet-mediated therapy, pet-oriented psychotherapy, companion-animal therapy, co-therapy with an animal, animal-assisted play therapy, and pet play therapy (VanFleet, 2008; Ensminger, 2010). AAT is a goal-directed means of intervention where the animal is an important part of the treatment process and included by trained service professionals within the scope of their practice. In contrast, Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA) are less formal activities, social in nature, often delivered by volunteers and tailored to a particular person or medical condition (Haubenhofer & Kirchengast, 2007; Friesen, 2010; Evans & Gray, 2011). “These terms signify a relationship between a handler, an animal, and another individual who will
benefit from the interaction with the animal” (Lange, Cox, Bernert, & Jenkins, 2006/2007, p. 19). For the purpose of this paper, AAT will signify the use of animals in counseling since AAT is the most commonly cited term in literature. In AAT, animals foster rapport-building, decrease anxiety, develop trust, build attachment, and increase openness. As a result, these effects lead to a feeling of emotional safety, improved motivation in counseling, and develop physical, cognitive, emotional, and social competencies (VanFleet, 2008). Interventions may take place with individuals or as part of a group setting. Unconsciously and informally, humans have been using animals for their mental health needs for years but are just in recent years using them in a conscious and formal manner to assist in adjustment and health (Levinson, 1997; Ensminger, 2010). When a child feels safe and secure, a counselor and child find equal footing and this is where therapeutic communication can take place, whether in a clinical setting or school setting.

History and Training

Archaeological evidence shows wolves living in close contact with people 300,000 years ago (VanFleet, 2008). There is evidence of a human relationship with domesticated dogs as guardians, guides, and partners for over 14,000 years (VanFleet, 2008; Walsh, 2009). Dogs are particularly suited to work in counseling. Dogs follow our cues and interpret our gestures, even better than non-human primates (Ensminger, 2010). The presence of a dog has been shown to be therapeutic, even when not providing actual therapy.

Dr. Boris Levinson is widely considered the father of AAT. Levinson, a child psychiatrist at Yeshiva University Medical School in New York, was the first professionally trained clinician to formally introduce and document the way companion-animals could hasten the development of rapport between counselor and patient, thereby increasing the likelihood of patient motivation (Levinson, 1997). He stated that animals “represent a half-way station on the
road back to emotional well-being” (Levinson, 1997, p. xviii). Levinson also stated that owning a pet is one way in which human sanity may be preserved (Walsh, 2009). Levinson used dogs in his psychotherapy practice much by accident when a young patient arrived early for an appointment. The boy, who was uncommunicative in previous sessions, began telling Levinson’s dog his problems. Levinson found that a dog present reduced anxiety in children and adolescents, improved rapport in the therapeutic relationship, provided comfort, allowed children to show nurturing abilities, and served as a model for healthy relationships (Ensminger, 2010). In was not intentionally Levinson’s intent to use his dog specifically in the treatment of the young boy, however the boy’s progress led him to regularly use his dog in counseling sessions and eventually termed the treatment as “pet-oriented child psychotherapy” (Lange et al., 2006/2007). Levinson’s crusade to help children and stimulate positive change relied on his use of animals in therapy and can be used in the school setting, as well (Anderson & Olson, 2006). Since Levinson, therapy animals, dogs in particular, have been studied in the home, therapeutic settings, classrooms, hospitals, and special-needs environments (Friesen, 2010).

The therapy dog movement began in the late 1970s and has since grown from several hundred dogs in a few communities to tens of thousands of dogs and patients as part of a national phenomenon (Ensminger, 2010). Proper selection, training, and testing are imperative to the success of an animal-assisted therapy program (Lange et al., 2006/2007). A dog must have a good temperament; be obedient, calm, and friendly; and show no signs of aggression. Dogs attract attention in public places which makes their good behavior even more important in maintaining credibility (Pichot, 2012). Therapy dogs must tolerate a wide range of individuals and interactions, respond to verbal and nonverbal cues, and adjust their behavior based on the needs of each individual with whom they work (VanFleet, 2008). Therapy dogs do not have to
complete formal obedience classes, but the Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test through The American Kennel Club is generally expected, which requires an advanced level of training and obedience. This test involves proof of the dog’s ability to sit, lay down, stay, come, be ignored, be petted, walk on a leash, encounter other dogs, walk through a crowd, tolerate loud noises, and interact with all ages of people (Pichot, 2012). Two major therapy dog organizations were formed in the 1970s: Therapy Dogs International (TDI) and The Delta Society. Both of these organizations use the CGC as an evaluation and screening tool to determine the appropriateness and readiness of an animal and therapy team to provide services (Chandler, 2012). These two well-respected organizations provide certification, professional standards, continuing education, and support for therapy teams who work in a variety of settings, including schools.

**The Child-Animal Bond**

Animals capture imaginations and teach life lessons. There is limited empirical research that explores human-animal relationships even though the human-animal bond is well documented throughout history (Fine, 2010). Most children are surrounded by animals from birth; real, symbolic, and fantasy. From stuffed animals, to books, to pictures and nursery themes, animals are prevalent, and are often used as a source of teaching, comfort, and security (Walsh, 2009). Children’s toys include all species of animals and serve not only as entertainment, but as a “vehicle for moral learning and personal growth” (Evans & Gray, 2011, p. 603). The child-animal bond contributes to higher confidence, improvements in mood, greater empathy with humans, and serves as building blocks in development and social relations. Studies show that animals play a role in a child’s development of self, imagination, play, empathy, and morality, as well as their social and communicative development and connection
with others (Solomon, 2010). Philosopher John Locke wrote that giving children animals to care for developed tender feelings and responsibility for others (Fine, 2010; Chandler, 2012).

Animals are found in many schools, especially preschool and elementary schools, to influence children’s development. Play therapists often use animal themed toys or puppets (Fine, 2010). Children can more closely and quickly relate to a therapy animal which can facilitate a connection between child and counselor and contribute to a warmer, safer, and more trusting environment (Chandler, 2012). Animals and humans engage in social behavior in a collaborative, reciprocal way. Dogs are students of human movement and are skilled at problem solving in coordination with humans. Furthermore, “social learning and traditions in nature can enhance our understanding of the nature and origins of human culture”, especially since the behaviors of animals differ from community to community, just as human behaviors do (Claidière & Whiten, 2011, p. 126). As animals bond with each other as social beings, they also bond with humans. The American Veterinary Medical Association defines the human-animal bond as a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship leading to the health and well-being of both through emotional, psychological, and physical interactions (Fine, 2010). Dogs, specifically, are uniquely suited for AAT for many reasons: children of various cultures are drawn to dogs and enjoy interactions with them; most dogs are playful and engaging by nature; dogs are accepting and nonjudgmental with people; dogs seem to show and respond to empathy; dogs seem to enjoy physical contact; dogs can exhibit similar behaviors and social problems as children do; dogs are trainable and adaptable; dogs are active; dogs live in the here and now; and dogs are social with a need for attachment (VanFleet, 2008; Nielsen, Galef, Subiaul, Zentall, & Whiten, 2012). Children and adolescents confide in animals, play with them, sleep with them, and consider them friends and family members. Dogs also play with humans in far more
complex ways than other animals do (Walsh, 2009; Ensminger, 2010). In fact, many humans interact with dogs in much the same way as they interact with infants or toddlers, often speaking for them, anticipating their needs, and interpreting their behaviors and communication (Ensminger, 2010).

Children share a special bond with animals, especially dogs. It is necessary to develop new ways of reaching not only the general population of children in schools, but traumatized and at-risk youths, in ways that are beyond traditional talk therapy (Kemp, Signal, Botros, Taylor, & Prentice, 2014).

**Adlerian Concepts in Animal-Assisted Therapy**

Animal-Assisted Therapy aligns very well with Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy. In fact, out of 18 commonly used AAT techniques and intentions, 16 relate closely to Adlerian Theory (Chandler, 2012). These techniques and intentions establish an egalitarian relationship between counselor and client, as well as examine the major life tasks of work/school, love, and friendship. Animals can bridge social frustrations and discouragement that can lead children away from social connectedness, an important tenet of Adlerian Theory. Interactions with animals can also reveal an individual’s *private logic*. This private logic can drive an unhealthy striving and search for significance from childhood throughout life due to “inferiority feelings within family and community” (p. 148).

A therapist can use AAT techniques not only for revealing a child’s private logic, but also to facilitate rapport, trust, feelings of safety, social interaction and interest, insight, sharing of feelings, and enhancement of social and relational skills. Social connectedness is just as important in AAT as it is in Adlerian Therapy. Furthermore, dogs provide not only companionship, but also a sense of belonging, security, and social lubricant; all considered...
central to Adlerian Therapy. Dogs in counseling can provide an atmosphere of acceptance, stress release, and motivation for movement or change (VanFleet, 2008). Those with close relationships to their pets are often viewed as strange or socially deficient. Attachments to pets can be seen by some as a symbol of the inability to form healthy attachments to people. However, recent literature shows that human-animal interactions can actually foster healthy relationships with people and enhance social support (Walsh, 2009). Animals can facilitate social contacts and friendships. Strangers with dogs are more likely to stop and talk. Children desire to greet animals. Dog parks for owners become like play groups for parents with children. Studies also find that pets increase neighborhood interactions and a sense of community (Walsh, 2009).

Some therapists recommend that pets and service animals should be included on family genograms. Genograms should include information about the bonds with the animals, concerns, illness or anticipated loss, alliances with family members, and issues that contribute to conflict within the family (Walsh, 2009). Animal relationships can also be a vital part of family system assessment. Healing through building relationships with people and animals is possible with Adlerian Therapy and AAT (Risley-Curtiss, Rogge, & Kawam, 2013). After all, man needs a feeling of connectedness and communication with all of nature (Levinson, 1997).

**Benefits of Animal-Assisted Therapy in Schools**

Animals are “non-judgmental participants who are outside of the complications and expectations of human relationships” (Friesen, 2010, p. 261). Animals therefore can develop a unique position with children and adolescents and provide valuable social and emotional support in both educational and therapeutic settings.
Program-wide Benefits

Research strongly supports the benefits of animals in the educational environment through studies on several age groups measuring the effects of dogs (Chandler, 2012). Studies also indicate that physical contact with dogs caused lowered systolic blood pressure, lowered diastolic blood pressure, lowered mean arterial pressure, and lower reactivity when performing stressful tasks such as math (Somervill et al., 2009; O’Haire, 2013). College students, child inpatients in a hospital, and children aged 3 to 16 in school settings, also resulted in similar findings. Simply petting a dog will “increase neurochemicals associated with relaxation and bonding” and improve immune system functioning (Walsh, 2009, p. 466). In regards to mental health, studies show that AAT positively effects the psychosocial well-being and can reduce anxiety, depression, and social isolation, as well as increase coping ability (Eshbaugh et al., 2011; O’Haire, 2013; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2013). Animals can have a positive impact on children’s self-image, confidence, and perseverance (VanFleet, 2008). Communication skills are essential in order to connect with others, build relationships, and express oneself. Animals help children find their voice due to the reduction, or even elimination, of judgment or emotional abandonment (Faver & Bradley, 2009). After using animals in a program at Houston Elementary in Texas, the principal and teachers believed that AAT helped motivate the students in their use of communication skills, academic achievement, and behavioral or social development (Faver & Bradley, 2009). With a dog present, children and adolescents report greater feelings of relaxation, enjoyment in talking about themselves, ability to discuss more topics of love and loss, and feel a reduced fear of counseling (Lange et al., 2006/2007). The presence of a dog can also shorten the time needed to build rapport with a counselor.
Using AAT in group settings can be extremely successful with adolescents, as well. Benefits among individuals in an anger group study included calming effects, humor relief, safety in disclosing information, empathy, and motivation for attending counseling sessions (Lange et al., 2006/2007; Levinson, 1997).

Dogs in the classroom provide greater emotional stability and more positive attitudes, particularly in children with emotional and behavioral disorders (Friesen, 2010). Children tend to be more attentive, open, and alert in the presence of therapy dogs (Dietz et al., 2012). Dogs create a warm environment that is more conducive to effective treatment. Furthermore, therapy dogs in AAT help to encourage social risk-taking in children who are withdrawn, shy, experience high social anxiety, or reluctant to engage socially (Friesen, 2010). Children also experience increased attention span, openness, and desire for social contact. AAT providers and clinicians have reported that dogs provide the same qualities of a best friend, offering listening, empathy, and comfort (Geist, 2011). Children are constantly searching for their place and sense of belonging and significance. Children and adolescents want to be heard and understood. Animals provide this feeling of importance and significance for children and adolescents.

**Benefits to Specific Populations**

Animals have been shown to help children with a variety of educational needs (Faver & Bradley, 2009). Disturbed children have a need for physical contact but may be fearful because of past physical or emotional pain associated with people. Animals can fulfil this need for contact while also providing a safe and accepting environment (Levinson, 1997). Forming a positive relationship with a therapy dog is much simpler than forming relationships with people. Children dealing with Autism and Emotional & Behavioral Disorders greatly benefit from the use of AAT in the educational setting.
**Autism.** In the Houston Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities designed for children diagnosed with physical, emotional, and learning disabilities, including autism, activities involving animals helped children interact and engage in learning (Faver & Bradley, 2009). Autism “is a neurodevelopmental syndrome defined as a deficit in social reciprocity and communication, and an occurrence of repetitive behavior” with social problems including social avoidance, social indifference, and social awkwardness (Kršková, Talarovičová, & Olexová, 2010, p. 139). Autism disrupts communication and participation in social life. Symptoms of autism include: limited or abnormal speech, impaired social interaction, lack of eye contact, sensory over-sensitivity, and repetitive behaviors (Fine, 2010). Autism therapy and treatment include a combination of biochemical, neurosensory, psychodynamic, and behavioral approaches. AAT can be very beneficial as it promotes improvement in physical, social, emotional, and cognitive function. Autistic children are often able to behave toward animals in ways they cannot with people and AAT can actually increase socialization with people among autistic children (Kršková et al., 2010; Fine, 2010). Dogs can provide connection and social interaction that is nonverbal and uncomplicated (Solomon, 2010). Studies show that the presence of dogs helps children with autism show more socially appropriate behaviors, as well as decrease depression, learning difficulties, and conduct problems (Faver & Bradley, 2009). Dogs provide autistic children a repetitive “here and now” that is engaging and undemanding, where speech is not required (Solomon, 2010). Autism Service Dogs of America (ASDA) is a non-profit organization that provides trained dogs to children. These dogs help with socialization and emotion regulation (Ensminger, 2010).

In a meta-analysis that included 14 studies on the effects of AAT on children with autism, increased social interaction was reported in nine studies, increased communication and use of
language in five studies, three studies showed decreases in severity, three studies reported decreases in problem behaviors, and several reported various degrees of decreased stress and improved well-being (O’Haire, 2013). Children with autism even “prefer pictures of animals over humans and inanimate objects” (O’Haire, 2013, p. 1607). After interacting with a guinea pig, autistic children exhibit more playful moods, more focus, more awareness of their environment, higher-level interpersonal skills, and increased social awareness (Kršková et al., 2010). Children also engaged in more tactile, verbal, and eye contact interactions with people.

It is important to consider, however, that due to sensory oversensitivity, some children and adolescents with autism may not be able to tolerate the smell, noise, or touch of an animal (Fine, 2010). Learning cannot happen during overstimulation, so this must be evaluated and monitored closely on an individual student basis.

**Emotional and behavioral disorders.** Levinson found that emotionally disturbed children “can more easily or quickly establish relationships with animals” and often prefer contact with and animal over that of an unfamiliar person (Kršková et al., 2010, p. 148). Through AAT, students with emotional and behavioral disabilities are able to work on behavioral challenges and academic engagement (Bassette & Taber-Doughty, 2013). Through AAT, students can work on problematic behaviors such as lack of attention, hyperactivity, poor social skills, and opposition. Students develop increased confidence, self-esteem, self-control, and motivation.

Research conducted through teacher surveys on the influence of animals in classrooms determined that animals have the potential to be a calming tool and increase psychological well-being among students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Anderson & Olson, 2006; Anderson, 2007). Studies conducted in Austria discovered that animals in the classroom reduced
aggressiveness and hyperactivity (Ensminger, 2010). A groundbreaking study was conducted at an urban North Dakota elementary school serving predominantly low socioeconomic areas and students, 6 to 11 years of age, with severe emotional and behavioral disorders. Although the dog used was not a certified therapy dog, multiple benefits resulted. Under strict guidelines, which the children had no difficulty following, qualitative and quantitative data was gathered on episodes of emotional crisis displayed by the students. The study included daily observations, teacher documentation, and student and parent interviews. Results indicated that the dog’s presence contributed to a feeling of emotional stability and improved attitudes toward school. Contact with the dogs facilitated learning lessons in responsibility, respect, and empathy towards animals and people (Anderson & Olson, 2006). The numbers of emotional crises were greatly reduced in all children involved, in some cases down to zero during the study period. The students seemed to develop a greater sense of self and ability to stabilize emotions. This led to an understanding of their emotional triggers, an ability to solve difficulties, and an ability to improve their relationships with peers (Anderson & Olson, 2006; Anderson, 2007).

Children with emotional and behavioral disabilities often experience difficulty into adulthood. Many of these children also have difficulty with reading skills. Research suggests that poor reading skills can lead to challenges in dealing with authority figures as adults (Bassette & Taber-Doughty, 2013). Reading intervention programs with animals can be successful with these students. Although qualitative support for animals in schools is prevalent, quantitative support is needed for the future study of the effects of animals in special education classrooms (Anderson & Olson, 2006; Anderson, 2007).
Violence Prevention Programs

Children learn respect and kindness through their interactions with animals which not only benefits themselves and others, but all animals (Faver & Bradley, 2009). Connections between animal abuse and interpersonal violence do exist, however, most school-based violence prevention programs fail to address exposure to animal abuse or the link between juvenile animal abuse and violence in adolescence and adulthood (Faver, 2009). Including animals in stories, lessons, and activities assist in teaching respect, kindness, and responsibility in relationships. These lessons can be linked to state educational standards. While building academic skills, students also develop empathy and pro-social behavior. Animals help “increase children’s ability and willingness to understand another’s perspective (cognition), share another’s feelings (affect), and help others (behavior). Perspective-taking and sharing another’s feelings is the definition of empathy, which promotes pro-social behavior” (Faver, 2009, p. 365). In one school-based violence prevention and character education program, interactions with dogs significantly altered negative beliefs, reduced aggression, and increased empathy in elementary and middle school children (Chandler, 2012).

Animal abuse is correlated with an increased risk of aggression against humans, including child abuse, domestic violence, and other forms of deviant behavior (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2013). It is important to include animals in assessments of children and families in a variety of practice settings, including schools, as there is a link between animal abuse and family violence (Faver & Cavazos Jr., 2008). Furthermore, “pet abuse is often an indicator of domestic violence toward human family members” (Walsh, 2009, p. 486). Unfortunately, often counselors do not want to hear the details of animal abuse (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2013). Prevention and education programs with animals can be successful in breaking the cycle of abuse
and violence. Through AAT play interactions with dogs, children and adolescents can practice behavior modification and gain personal insight in order to challenge their irrational thoughts or self-defeating beliefs (Chandler, 2012). A child or adolescent’s own need for acceptance and empathy must be met first in order for that individual to develop and show empathy (VanFleet, 2008). One manner in which these needs can be met is through school-based AAT programs.

**Animal-Assisted Interventions**

Educational and therapeutic settings link learning and healing with the presence of animals. Teachers with animals in their classrooms report beneficial effects to children including alleviating problems such as shyness and aggression, and assisting in emotion regulation (Anderson, 2007). Interventions using therapy animals, dogs in particular, are largely successful and valuable in educational and therapeutic settings. Animal interventions positively impact children and adolescents in areas of psychiatric disorders, sexual abuse, PTSD, hyperactivity, oppositional behavior, pain management, and insecure attachment (Dietz et al., 2012). Furthermore, therapy dogs are an effective approach to crisis intervention (Geist, 2011). Animals should ideally enhance the therapeutic process. “Therapy dogs provide a unique form of support to children’s learning, physical health, and emotional well-being, not otherwise possible through human interaction and intervention alone” (Friesen, 2010, p. 265). Common AAT interventions in school settings contribute to the successful treatment of learning, anxiety, ADHD, abuse, and attachment disorders.

**Learning**

Animal-assisted education programs are growing in popularity. The use of dogs as part of a classroom to improve academic achievement is still being evaluated and studied. However, dogs have many beneficial uses in classroom instruction. Interactions may include silent or oral
reading while holding or sitting with a dog; writing about or photographing the dog; studying science, physiology, and behavior of the dog; and researching the social history, careers, and domestication of dogs or animals in general (Anderson, 2007). Classroom counseling lessons may include: how to use the dog as a calming tool, how to evaluate and meet the dog’s (and each other’s) needs, how to be respectful, and how to socialize. All of the above skills are generalizable to education, home and community settings. AAT in the classroom utilizes a therapy dog and counselor working with teachers to achieve preset goals and objectives. One such learning objective may be the pronunciation of specific words or sounds. The consonant “s” at the beginning of words can be difficult for some children. Using a therapy dog as reward when students properly pronounce words, and having children ask the dog to “sit”, can build skills and confidence. Children who were once reluctant to read aloud became engaged and positive in the presence of a therapy dog. The therapy dog also can encourage positive interactions with the teacher. Students tend to be more responsive, attentive, cooperative, and engaged with a dog in the classroom (Friesen, 2010). Academic engagement may be active (reading aloud) or passive (silent reading). Engagement also means staying on-task in class. Students involved in AAT show more engagement, as well as higher comprehension scores than those students not experiencing animal therapy (Bassette & Taber-Doughty, 2013).

One successful reading intervention program, based on research that children feel less anxious and more motivated in the presence of dogs, is Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.). The R.E.A.D. program began in Salt Lake City in 1999 by Intermountain Therapy Animals (ITA). ITA has thousands of registered therapy dogs from all 50 states, Canada, and other countries. Students participating in the R.E.A.D. program for 13 months improved at least two grade levels and some improved four grade levels (Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004;
Faver & Bradley, 2009). Similar results were shown with the Carolina Canines for Service project. While working with dogs just 20 minutes, once per week, throughout the school year, children improved reading skills by at least two grade levels.

A 2010 study at the University of California-Davis School of Veterinary Medicine found that reading to dogs improved fluency (Chandler, 2012). As part of an AAT reading program called All Ears Reading Program, third grade students visited and read to dogs every week for 10 weeks. Fluency increased 12% for school-based students, 30% for home-schooled students, and reading speeds increased by up to 30 words per minute. Parents of the students also reported that the children were now reading aloud more frequently than before the intervention. The dogs helped the students feel less anxious and more relaxed and accepted (Chandler, 2012).

In the presence of a therapy dog, preschool children follow directions better relating to object categorization and movement based tasks. Children also make fewer mistakes and show improvement in memory (Gee, 2012).

Animal related “games can be developed to motivate individuals to perform skills that they have long given up trying to accomplish” (Lind, 2009, p. 52). These games foster educational standards such as sequencing, communicating with others, following directions, attention to task, cooperation, teamwork, reading, verbalizing, and self-control.

Anxiety

Research indicates that 10%-20% of children experience distressing levels of anxiety (Mychailyszyn et al., 2011). Anxiety causes children to miss important age-appropriate and developmentally critical social interactions. Untreated anxiety can lead to worsened symptoms over time and can lead to more anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. Curing anxiety is not a goal in school counseling but rather managing it. Therapy dogs have been extremely valuable in
the reduction of stress and anxiety in educational, therapeutic, and health care settings. Therapy dogs have a profound calming effect on children leading to reduced anxiety which, in turn, assists them in engaging with peers and adults. Children and adolescents have reported feeling heard and understood when in the presence of a therapy dog (Friesen, 2010).

In times of increased stress and family change, including moving and school changes, “children with pets are less anxious and withdrawn” (Walsh, 2009, p. 482). This provides an opportunity for a unique service as part of the school counseling program. Family change and stress groups commonly address military families, divorce, and moving. Having a new, novel, and effective approach to reach these students is vital. Dogs provide tactile stimulation that may alleviate the derealization, depersonalization, restlessness, fear, distractibility, and physiological symptoms that accompany anxiety (Ensminger, 2010).

**ADHD**

Children and adolescents with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may react differently to an animal. A dog used for AAT with children and adolescents with ADHD may have an excitatory effect rather than a calming one (Somervill et al., 2009). If a child is easily excitable or over reactive, it could lead to increased physiological arousal. In a study with 30 children aged 6 to 12 in a “level 3” special education school, 17 with ADHD were studied using AAT programing (Somervill et al, 2009). The children’s blood pressure and heart rate were tested after sessions with a dog. The children were given no instructions on how to interact with the dog, however, which in itself could be anxiety producing for some. Although there were significant decreases in heart rate, there were also significant increases in blood pressure. Almost all children seemed to enjoy the interaction with the dog, however. Being happy or excited are positive emotional experiences that can still have physiological effects. Teacher
reports after dog interactions noted that all children seemed happy and in a better mood than before the AAT interventions. Although there were no conclusive results of this study, the positive changes could indicate favorable consequences for AAT use with children and adolescents with ADHD.

Dog-assisted interventions involving training, grooming, calming, and emotion regulation can be applied to children and adolescents with ADHD. Running with a dog, and stopping, allows a student to teach control, as do games involving commands such as “stay” and “come”. Teaching a dog proper behavior gives students insight into how to manage their own. Clicker training dogs also provides students with ADHD focus and goal-directed activity (VanFleet, 2008).

Abuse

There is growing popularity in the area of AAT programs for at-risk youth and families. The link between animal abuse and family violence is evident and using animals in therapeutic interventions is valuable (Faver & Cavazos Jr., 2008). Evaluating if there is currently a pet in the home, and what role it plays in the family, is important in determining if AAT interventions for abuse will be beneficial. If AAT is used with children who have been abused, care must be taken to inquire about animal abuse, otherwise animals and children may be put at risk and the opportunity for successful intervention will be missed (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2013).

Child sexual abuse affects approximately one in three girls and one in seven boys (Dietz et al., 2012). The trauma of child sexual abuse leads to long lasting social problems including psychopathology, behavioral problems, and revictimization (Kemp et al., 2013). Furthermore, victims of abuse experience a range of mental health effects including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, guilt, feelings of powerlessness, anti-social behaviors, dissociation, conduct
disorders, eating disorders, suicide ideation, and substance abuse (Sánchez-Meca, Rosa-Alcázar, & López-Soler, 2011; Dietz et al., 2012; Kemp et al., 2014). Animals offer a sense of unconditional positive regard and control that abused children may not have experienced in their home lives (Signal, Taylor, Prentice, & Lazarus, 2013). Therapy animals, particularly dogs, provide a safe environment of trust and acceptance for child and adolescent victims of abuse which gives them an opportunity to open up and talk. Children and adolescents show significant reduction in abuse related depression, anxiety, insecurity, tension, anger, PTSD, sexual concerns, and dissociation through AAT with dogs (Dietz et al., 2012; Signal et al., 2013).

When working with families, animals can be used to teach parents and siblings how to give and receive affection, as well as how to teach and reward positive behaviors. Physical touch or closeness with an animal has the potential to generate feelings of connectedness and acceptance when love and support seem unavailable from the family system (Faver & Cavazos Jr., 2008). Homework assignments involving at home pets involving care and training can foster parenting skills, communication, behavior modification, empathy, responsibility, and appropriate discipline. Family members can also monitor their pets at home for emotional changes to practice being more in-tune to each other’s needs. Skills developed through AAT at home are easily transferable to school and community environments.

Anger groups in schools often involve at-risk students experiencing abuse in the home. The presence of a dog in adolescent anger management groups provides beneficial effects (Lange et al., 2006/2007). During the course of a 12 week anger management group, adolescents showed a significant reduction in emotional anger, behavioral anger, loneliness, isolation, and stress, as well as an increase in happiness, security, and self-worth. Animal attachment also resulted. Individuals engaged in tasks including grooming, walking, teaching tricks, and feeding.
The students were able to relate human anger to dog anger which provided lessons in reading facial expression and body language. The dog also served as a buffer for their own anger resulting in a reduced number of aggressive acts at school.

**Attachment**

Pets are a consistent source of attachment security among pet owners (Walsh, 2009). Even individuals who do not have pets show high levels of pet attachment (Eshbaugh et al., 2011). In a 2013 study on pet attachment, single children and youngest children report stronger attachment to pets, particularly dogs (Westgarth et al., 2013). Furthermore, there was no difference in attachment between gender, ethnicity, or dog breed. The literature on human-animal bonds indicates that animals often meet the four features of attachment: proximity seeking, safe haven, secure base, and separation distress (Fine, 2010; Parish-Plass, 2013). The idea of safe haven is central to research on attachment. Safe haven, defined as turning to someone physically or emotionally when alone, depressed, or stressed, occurs in both children and adults. Kurdek (2009) found that individuals turned to their pet dogs as often as sisters and even more so than fathers and brothers. Attachment levels depended on the level of involvement in the care of the dog. Therefore, those who regard their relationship with their dog as very strong have higher levels of attachment and more often consider their dogs as a safe haven (Kurdek, 2009; Walsh, 2009). However, it is important to consider that a dog’s desire for closeness may frighten a child with insecure attachment patterns due to transference. In this case, smaller animals, such as guinea pigs or hamsters, may be more effective. Some individuals will be comforted by animals, some will be anxious by the animal’s presence.
Limitations and Barriers

“One of the most effective ways to establish professional credibility when using an innovative intervention is to refer to national standards and accepted practice as precedence” (Pichot, 2012, p. 69). A successful and credible AAT program include written policies, procedures, and practices in place to cover all areas of program implementation and animal use. A discussion of some considerations for the development of AAT, particularly surrounding, regulations and barriers to the use of AAT follows.

Regulations

Federal rules provide that public accommodation must permit the use of a service animal, which includes places of education. Service dogs perform specific tasks for individuals with a recognized, DSM mental health diagnosis. The Department of Justice Legislation does not, however, consider emotional support and therapy animals as service animals (Ensminger, 2010). This means the determination of the appropriateness for a therapy dog or AAT program into the school counseling program rests primarily with the school and school district. There are clear standards, ethical guidelines, and credentials for the use of therapy dogs. Credibility is crucial for professionals using AAT in any setting (Pichot, 2012). The Delta Society, Therapy Dogs Incorporated, and Therapy Dogs International all provide set educational and testing standards for dogs and professionals. The Delta Society provides advice, guidelines, training, certification, and support for AAT professionals. The organization also provides a handbook with information on animal suitability, selection, welfare, and health needs (Evans & Gray, 2011).

There are specific liability issues surrounding AAT. Training must take place regarding concerns, as well as how to obtain professional and personal liability insurance. Dogs and
handlers are covered by the Delta Society’s insurance policy when certified through this organization (VanFleet, 2008). Professionals may need to use their homeowners insurance in addition to professional insurance for proper and complete coverage when working with any animals in AAT (Lange et al., 2006/2007; Chandler, 2012). In all, many schools are excited to have therapy dogs. Teachers and staff find that the benefits outweigh the risks. Typically, schools are mostly concerned that the dog and counselor team are certified and registered with one of the major therapy dog organizations and possess insurance coverage (Ensminger, 2010).

**Concerns with Animals in the Schools**

A main deterrent for AAT are the issues of cleanliness, allergies, zoonotic diseases, and safety. Screening students for allergies, cultural concerns, and animal fears should always take place in AAT settings.

**Sanitation and allergies.** A main deterrent for AAT is the issue of cleanliness and allergies. However, only about 6% of people seen by allergists are doing so because of animal allergies (Friesen, 2010). For work with dogs, a protocol should be in place that includes regular bathing and grooming, veterinary care, hand washing and sanitizing, regular washing of blankets or pillows used by the dogs, and having designated areas for the dog to be, or not be, in. There should be clearly defined areas and protocols regarding elimination and waste removal and cleaning staff should be made aware of any additional vacuuming, sweeping, or mopping needs (Pichot, 2012). Even with these cleanliness protocols, the therapy dog handler is much more likely to bring a disease into a building than the dog is (Ensminger, 2010).

**Safety.** Although not all dogs in AAT research and literature are certified, certified therapy dogs present a reduced level of risk associated with injury due to training and temperament. It is imperative that written consent is obtained from parents and students for
animal use. Ongoing direction and consultation with administration should also be maintained (Anderson, 2007). Approximately 400,000 children seek medical attention for dog bites each year in America and many more go untreated (Jalongo, 2008). Children must learn safe ways of interacting with dogs. Due to the vast number of incidents, safety must be taught whether incorporated into an AAT program or not. However, school-based AAT programs are a successful way of teaching dog bite prevention. Dogs can be incorporated to educate children on five common situations that accompany dog aggression and how to handle them. Children not only learn safe ways to interact with dogs, but ways to interact with classmates that foster respectful boundaries. These situations and exercises include: calmly, kindly, and gently approaching a dog; noticing fearful or aggressive body language and giving a dog space; not teasing or cornering a dog; treating different dogs or animals differently based on their individual needs or personalities; and responding safely to aggression (Jalongo, 2008).

Cultural differences. There is little research on ethnic diversity and the human-animal bond. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity place importance on the proper treatment of animals (Walsh, 2009). Asian and Indigenous cultures often draw symbolic meaning and teaching from nature and animals. Native Americans are statistically most likely to own companion animals, followed by Caucasians, then Hispanic individuals and those of Asian descent (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006). African Americans were statistically least likely to own pets. However, African American youths were most likely to have sole responsibility for the care of the pet in their home, followed by Hispanics. Of all these groups, the majority still considered the pet to be a member of the family (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006). Faver & Cavazos Jr. (2008) stress that questions about pets should be included in assessments and interviews with children and families in a wide range of settings. Such questions are especially important in relation to the individual
or family’s ethnicity and feeling about the use of AAT. “Childhood experience of pets may vary between ethnic and cultural groups” which may influence how animals are treated and interacted with in AAT (Westgarth et al., 2013, Background, para. 2).

**Fear.** It is important to remember that not all children have had positive experiences with animals. Fears or phobias can develop out of traumatic experiences or bites. Often, dog fears and phobias can be successfully treated or eliminated through AAT when implemented by trained professionals with clear treatment plans and processes (Evans & Gray, 2011).

**Training.** It is vital for counselors using AAT to participate in continuing education, read books and journals, join AAT listservs, and attend conferences. Continuing education increases the benefits and decreases the risks of the AAT program (Lange et al., 2006/2007). Another barrier to AAT is staff training. Those in educational and clinical settings state that AAT may be used if not for lack of familiarity with risk, time, money, training, and regulations (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2013). School staff have also expressed a need for clear administration-initiated direction. As a counselor initiating AAT, it is helpful to provide resources and inservices for staff members about AAT in order to facilitate cooperation, support, and education about the benefits and concerns surrounding animals in schools.

**Use of Other Animals**

Dogs are not the only animals that have proven to be valuable and impactful as part of an AAT program. Cats, horses, farm animals, fish, and “pocket pets” such as rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, and turtles, have also facilitated change for children and adolescents. Interestingly, in the 2012 meta-analysis of research on AAT with children with Autism, “there were no apparent differences in outcomes based on the type of animal” with whom the child interacted (O’Haire, 2013, p. 1609). In autistic children, horse-facilitated therapy helps children show social
behaviors; dolphin therapy has positive effects on emotional interactions and speech development; guinea pigs increase cooperation and social behavior; and rats stimulate language skills (Kršková et al., 2010; Chandler, 2012). Evans and Gray (2011) found that Equine-Assisted Counseling (EAC) reduces internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors, improves adaptive skills, and reduces maladaptive skills in classroom students. The use of alpacas, pigs, and other farm animals produce similar results.

The Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) provides certification, education, conferences, and ethical standards for EAP professionals and programs. Success using horses may be attributed to the size of horses and the empowerment gained from interacting with and caring for such large animals. Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) and Equine-Facilitated Therapy (EFT) are mostly non-verbal techniques by nature. This may appeal nicely to individuals with various mental health and social concerns such as Autism, ADHD, PTSD, adjustment, conduct, and mood disorders (Kemp et al., 2014) Using horses may also be nicely suited to those of Indigenous cultures due to the natural, practical nature of equine work. Programs find “heightened self-efficacy, coping abilities, self-esteem, and social confidence following interaction with horses” (p. 560). Horses are prey animals which allows them to be uniquely and instinctively attuned to the body language and emotions of humans, who are predatory animals. Working with large and powerful animals also offers abuse victims a sense of control, validation, and authority which increases problem solving and conflict resolution skills and self-esteem (Parish-Plass, 2008; Signal, 2013).

Levinson (1997) stated that simply observing fish in an aquarium fosters discussion of growth and development and can have a soothingly stimulating effect similar to staring at fire in a hearth. In a 2013 study using guinea pigs in classroom AAT, social functioning improved
greatly among elementary school students (O’Haire, et al., 2013). Dolphin interactions, lizards, crabs, snails, parrots, iguanas, chinchillas, ferrets, rats, mice, and gerbils can teach compassion, empathy, and responsibility in a variety of learning and therapeutic settings and show equal results to counseling with dogs (Levinson, 1997; VanFleet, 2008; Chandler, 2012; Parish-Plass, 2013).

**Conclusion**

Further, and more recent, research is needed on the practice of AAT. AAT is “a psychosocial intervention worthy of further investigation” (O’Haire, 2013, p. 1619). People of color are underrepresented in research and literature surrounding AAT. Future studies should be completed on the generalization of benefits across cultures and ethnicities. Studies would also be beneficial to examine differences in efficacy among various geographic regions, ages, genders, levels of education, religions, and urban or rural areas (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006; Faver & Cavazos Jr., 2008; Somervill et al., 2009). Although current studies show a link, further research is also needed about the relationship between human and animal abuse. Small sample size in the majority of research is another limitation to the generalizability of current studies, as is the low number of assessments used, lack of control conditions, and potentially biased outcomes (Bassette & Taber-Doughty, 2013; O’Haire, 2013).

Further research is needed on the most effective time and amount of AAT utilized to be not only beneficial for participants, but for the health and well-being of human-dog counseling teams (Haubenhofer & Kirchengast, 2007). It would be prudent to have times of the day where animals are not working and are provided with a quiet place for rest and relaxation. This teaches children lessons on respect, personal space, and boundaries at the same time as protecting the animal from burnout. Dogs should be offered water, bedding, toys or chews, grooming tools,
treats, and a crate if needed in order to provide a comforting and secure environment.

Understanding animal communication and stress signals is imperative to the safety of participants and health of animals. Signs of stress in dogs include shaking, panting, restlessness, lack of eye contact, excessive shedding and vocalizing, hiding, need for repetitive commands, and inappropriate urination or defecation (Chandler, 2012; Pichot, 2012). Education surrounding recognition of these signals is vital for the success and effectiveness of an AAT program.

Special consideration should be given to the impact of the loss of a therapy animal. While this can teach valuable lessons to students about grief and loss, it may also negatively impact feeling of attachment and trust (VanFleet, 2008). Loss of an animal can be profound. Over 85% of individuals with pets report significant grief symptoms that last months or years. Some experience grief as deeply as with the loss of a human family member (Walsh, 2009). This impact can vary depending on degree of attachment, role of the animal, timing, and reasons for loss. Too often this loss is trivialized, pathologized, or unacknowledged. Awareness, validation, and further research is needed in the area of pet loss and grief in order to effectively counsel individuals and properly support and AAT program. That said, dogs have the ability to comfort children who are grieving the loss of family members or friends. Children can be confused and frightened by grief and therapy dogs offer solace to those experiencing loss (VanFleet, 2008). Furthermore, counselors grow extremely attached to their animal co-counselors. Protective feelings may arise when students or staff mistreat the animal or are disinterested and unwelcoming to an animal. Self-monitoring and consultation should be considered in order to process and deal with these feelings.
Another consideration is whether animal models or simulations can be as effective as live animals. The well-being of animals may be enhanced if alternative forms of humane education can be used (O’Haire, 2013).

Only about 20%-50% of children with mental health problems access services and a large portion of services are provided by schools (Mychailyszyn et al., 2011). Schools are an important part of a child’s microsystem. Providing mental health services in the schools that include AAT can reduce the stigma of mental health and reach more students. To date, much of research has been anecdotal in nature. Scientific evaluation of AAT effectiveness in multiple settings can help legitimize and fund programs (Geist, 2011). Incorporating AAT into school and therapeutic settings will not only benefit the children and adolescents, but therapists, teachers, and other adults as well.
References


