



Rethinking Dog-Assisted Therapy Programs: A Call for Reviewing Current Approaches

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Abstract

There is now increasing evidence that when introduced to treatment, dogs can have a positive impact on many clinical problems. These include compromised mental function, communication and language impairments, social disabilities, emotional difficulties, unwanted behavior, and physical problems. The data come from individual or group studies, conducted in different settings with individuals throughout life, including children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly. In the field of physical therapy specifically, a growing body of research shows that a dog used as an aid to therapy can motivate patients to not only perform the exercises they normally would, not want to perform but also for a longer period, thereby increasing the benefit of the therapy. progress. Research has also shown that physical therapy can help improve sensory modulation and sensory interpretation. In addition, tasks such as asking the patient to walk the animal, petting and grooming it, or playing fetch with a motor component, can increase muscle strength and improve fine motor control. mobility. It is important to note that, unlike rote exercises in which the patient moves according to spatially given instructions or to the therapist's performance, these tasks have a high functional benefit. Another benefit reported in experimental studies has to do with the unique ability of these animals to capture patients' attention and make them forget the pain associated with certain activities. movement. In addition, dogs can make patients more comfortable and less stressed during therapy sessions, either by providing a non-threatening diversion from anxiety-provoking tasks or by so-called comfort in contact. physical contact.

The benefits of dog-assisted therapy

Dog-assisted therapy, also known as animal-assisted therapy or pet therapy, has demonstrated numerous benefits in various contexts. Research has shown that interactions with dogs can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. The presence of a friendly and non-judgmental animal can create a sense of connection and decrease feelings of isolation, particularly among individuals in hospitals, nursing homes, and rehabilitation centers. Moreover, dog-assisted therapy can help improve social interactions and communication skills, especially in individuals with autism spectrum disorders or other developmental challenges [1-3]. As evidence for the benefits associated to the 'dog-human bond' is growing, dog-assisted programs are being increasingly accepted as a valid approach in a number of institutions, and even sometimes exploited with profit purposes. It is our opinion, however, that many of the programs that are being offered (or sold) as dog-assisted therapy programs do not meet the criteria originally defined by the Pet Partners® organization for qualifying as therapy.

According to the Pet Partners® organization, for a dog-assisted intervention to be considered therapy it has to be run by a health/human service professional with specialized expertise and within the scope of practice of his/her profession. In practice, however, the rule first be a therapist is commonly neglected. Anyone who has minimum skills in dog handling and in the use of applications of animal-human interactions - provided by (very) short-term courses - can be found conducting dog-assisted therapy programs using generalist, recipelike, approaches. What we think one can legitimately question is whether these so-called animal therapists can design and implement effective, tailor-made, therapeutic interventions within a number of very specific domains, such as, for instance, physiotherapy. Importantly to refer is that, in no moment, we intend to depreciate the efforts of those motivated primarily by the desire to help and promote well-being with the aid of dogs. What we consider is that everyone involved in dog-assisted programs should refrain from using (and selling) the term therapy when, in fact, only dog-assisted activities - which do present motivational and recreational benefits - are actually being offered to the patients [4-6].

Another of our concerns is whether dog-assisted therapy programs should continue to be viewed as a complementary therapeutic package instead of being fully integrated into different disciplines. That is, do patients gain, for instance, from complementing physiotherapy interventions with dog-assisted therapy programs? Or do patients benefit more from dog-assisted physiotherapy, conducted by a specialized physiotherapist working together with a certified dog-handler team? Clearly, complementing physiotherapy sessions with dog-assisted therapy programs may be more time and financially consuming for the patients and their families, and, from our point of view, can potentially lead to a risk of conflict between the different therapists and their theoretical/operational models. It seems to us, therefore, that academic curriculums of health and social science should prepare professionals to reach an effective training encompassing the most recent developments in the field of dog-assisted therapy programs, thus allowing them to effectively integrate dog-handler teams into their specialized practices, namely physiotherapy.

Conclusion

Dog-assisted therapy programs offer a promising avenue for improving mental and emotional well-being. However, a critical evaluation of current practices is necessary to ensure their continued

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success and safety. By focusing on training, certification, participant safety, ethical treatment of therapy dogs, evidence-based practices, and personalized approaches, we can refine and optimize dog-assisted therapy programs to maximize their benefits for participants and the dogs involved. With a thoughtful and responsible approach, dog-assisted therapy can continue to make a positive impact on countless lives. Given the increasing attention of media devoted to therapeutic dogs, it seems crucial, to us, to reconsider current practices so that, in the long term, the credibility of dog-assisted therapy programs does not suffer serious fading.

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