

Canine Interventions: Empowering Children in Eight Canine Therapy Sessions

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Abstract: *Assisted Therapy (AAT) is the utilization of animals as a therapeutic method; it is the deliberate inclusion of an animal in a treatment plan. Animal - assisted therapy has been practiced for many years and can be a useful intervention for individuals or groups. Studies found positive outcomes and overall improved emotional well - being in individuals with autism, (Redefer and Goodman 1989), medical conditions (Havenar et al.2001), compromised mental functioning (Kanamori et al.2001), emotional difficulties (Barker and Dawson 1998), undesirable behaviors (Nagengast et al.1997), and physical problems (Nathanson et al.1997). Florence Nightingale - the founder of social work, first identified the therapeutic potential of animals in the 1800s, and found that small pets assisted in reducing anxiety in children and adults alike. Sigmund Freud discovered, during a session with a patient, that the dog recognized the patient's stress level and kept their distance; however, when the patient's stress level reduced, the dog came closer to the patient. Humans and dogs have had a special bond for thousands of years—this presents itself in the way dogs work, play, and live with us (Reisen 2022) Dogs have certain genes that, in humans, are associated with the rare genetic disorder: Williams - Beuren syndrome - a symptom of which is "indiscriminate friendliness. " (Bridgett M. vonHoldt et al 2017) This, however is not true for all dogs, since some dogs are not as friendly. Canine therapy is very common for children with autism, yet there are many other uses for "normal" children that canine therapy can assist with; for example: low self - esteem, self - control, sensory regulation, mutual listening, deferred gratification, human interaction, social and leadership skills, and of course - fear of dogs (Serpell, McCune, Gee, Griffin 2017). This paper will perceive how canine therapy, empowers groups of children within school activity; through an eight - session process in a versatile group, in which integrating children from the same age but with different issues - both mental, physical and behavioral.*

Keywords: Animal Assistive Therapy, dog therapy, canine therapy, school activity

Group description:

Children who are unable to form close satisfying relationships with peers should be a focus of concern. They miss out on opportunities to learn social skills that will remain important throughout their life. Especially critical are the skills needed to initiate and maintain social relationships and to resolve social conflicts (Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984).

The group was made up of seven children in the 3rd grade, who study in the same class, three of which were girls and four were boys; Jhas autism and was scared of the dogs at first. The other children were very considerate of her, and aware of her autism. The group as a whole was very balanced, attentive and happy to learn and work with the dogs; there were no disciplinary problems or lack of respect for each other, and all children were attentive and respectful - both to each other and the dogs.

Rationale for group process:

Inclusion is an educational program practice that integrates all levels of learners in one classroom and is the "process of overcoming the barriers limiting the participation of all learners" (Meindl et al., 2020, p.1). The fact that J is on the spectrum yet integrated in a regular class, is already a process of inclusion and acceptance of diversity; something this school takes much pride in. Although J has an adult integrator present and conspicuous at all time, in our sessions she sat aside and watched how everything and everyone came together for J. Inclusion benefits all students within a classroom by minimizing stereotypes while encouraging learning to occur between all peers. Stigma often follows students who have autism, and ensuring that students with autism are included within regular classrooms can increase the knowledge around autism, along with creating more positive attitudes toward it (Anthony et al., 2020).

The setting:

The sessions were conducted out in the school yard - in an isolated and shaded synthetic grass area that can be changed and added to, relatively relinquished from the rest of the tumult of the school. I brought the accompanying accessories with us to every session, such as: a harness, a leash, snacks, sometimes a hoop, a frisbee, a puller, cones, chairs, etc. . . In other words, a place more reminiscent of a "black box"¹, where you can do whatever you want and there are no restrictions or diversions. The synthetic grass provides a wide response to a wide variety of activities, where the dogs can run and jump without getting injured.

The canine:

Sheila and Riley - both Australian shepherds, **Shiela** was two years old at the time and Riley was a year old. I adopted Sheila when she was a year and a half, after being bought by a family that did not set boundaries for her, did not make eye contact and was not disciplined at all. When Sheila was a year old, the family that bought her abandoned her and went to a rehab center. Sheila loves everyone regardless of religion, color, race, size, height or gender. Sheila has been with me for about seven months and at every meeting she surprises me with her abilities anew. She simply loves a person and devotes herself to anyone who approaches her and if he holds a game or food in his hand she will do as he wishes. She does not pull when being walked with on a leash, knows basic commands and some "tricks" and seems to enjoy it.

¹A **black box theater** is a simple performance space, typically a square room with black walls and a flat floor. The simplicity of the space allows it to be used to create a variety of configurations of stage and audience interaction. The black box is a relatively recent innovation in theatre¹

Riley has been with Sally since she was two months old, a pleasant and energetic dog, very attentive to Sally and attached to her. The initial meetings for them were in the nature of exposure and it was obvious that it was difficult to work in a "non - sterile" environment. At the same time, Sally was pleasantly surprised Riley responded to the children very nicely, even when they did things that stressed her or if she reached a certain threshold, she knew how to simply; get up and walk - sitting in a far corner with her back to the situation. Several times it seemed that Riley was the one who pulled Sally out of situations where she felt uncomfortable. Riley and Sheila worked together harmoniously, every time Riley reached her threshold, Sheila took command and let Riley rest. With regard to particular types of behavior problems, there is evidence of an association between dominance aggression in the dog and the anthropomorphic involvement of the owner; also between over - excitement and displacement activities in the dog and anxiety in the owner. Owner anxiety is not associated with a higher incidence of phobias in the dog; a dog's phobia, however, does tend to cause greater distress to a more anxious owner (O'farrell, 1987)

Group goals:

The main goal of the group initially was to create a harmonious and tolerant communication between the participants; however, the minute we realized that J was on the spectrum and was integrated into their class, we were going to do everything possible to let her feel she belongs in the group. Having said that, we did not avoid the original goals we initially had. Those goals were: deferred gratification, mutual listening, gross and fine motor skills, self - confidence, development of social skills, sensory regulation and communication. The initial idea that the children have a "break" from the regular school day alone, put moral very high.

Therapy dogs in educational settings have gained traction in recent times. Increasingly, dogs have provided therapeutic support in early education settings, primary and secondary schools, as well as university settings to support students' well - being, promote a sense of belonging in school, reduce stress and anxiety, and even facilitate learning (Kirnan, Ventresco 2018)

Characterization of patients according to group roles:

J: A girl on the spectrum, same age as the rest of the group, very tall and thin, and a bit gangly. Her class integrator really likes dogs; J, however is afraid of dog.

O: A good friend of J's, comes to her aid all the time, loves dogs very much, enjoys their closeness, and very excited to have our sessions every week.

T: Assertive, knows what she wants, loves dogs very much but a bit insecure within her group.

R: a small and gentle boy, very sensitive to his surroundings; loves dogs very much and is not afraid of their proximity.

M: A bit of an outsider, a "smart guy", apprehensive and insecure.

I: A physically small and gentle boy, very shy and does everything quietly and pleasantly.

E: A physically developed child, much bigger than the rest of the kids in his group; prone to tantrums, tends to throw things around when gets upset. .

Group protocol - detailed structure of each meeting:

Basic eminent learned on this course were divided into several sessions:

1. Eye contact. 2. Tone of voice 3. Body language 4. Hand movements 5. Snack.

Session 1:

In the first session I was alone with the group. I introduced Sheila to the group, talked about her history, what type of dog she was and what are the implications. Later, each child got to know Sheila more personally, while Sheila gave him/her a hand and the child introduced themselves to her. Later - each child told a little about themselves, what animals they have at home, etc. In this meeting we talked about safety rules for working with dogs - what is forbidden and what is allowed; the children were exposed to some of the exercises that Sheila knows and above all, they practiced restraint in front of her, so that everyone could speak in their turn.

Session 2:

In the second session Sally introduced Riley - her background, what type of dog she was, her age and how she was different from Sheila. Later, each child came up to her and introduced themselves, while Riley gave them a hand. In this session, we worked on contact and cooperation. The children formed a human bridge, while holding hands and each child in their turn led one of the dogs under the bridge. In this session we began to learn the five basic eminent in dog training, the first and the last - eye contact, snack. Just as you do not approach another child just like that on the street before your eyes meet, the same is true for dogs. We do not talk to each other when our back is turned, we maintain eye contact the entire time. Each child will practice eye contact with dogs using a clicker and a snack. Later we played a game in pairs - one child was blind folded, the other leads them only by talking through an obstacle course. This way we learned the importance of eye contact with each other and of course with the dog. Putting emphasize on the principle of a reward and a kind word to the dog.

Session 3:

On this session we learned the second eminent: tone of voice. Assertiveness is the name of the game. We learned how to properly speak and stand in front of an audience, how standing upright or despondent affects us and our environment, how a weak tone of voice does not promote us, and how a tone of voice is adapted to the situation - shouting or speaking too low. We learned basic commands such as - sit, down, stay, come and practiced this only by speaking. Not using hand gestures or body language.

Session 4:

On this session, we learned the third and fourth eminent in dog training - body language and hand movements. We continued to practice the basic commands and added body language and hand movements which correspond to the specific command. We practiced basic commands only by body language - without voice and hand movements. Later we practiced the basic commands only by eye contact - without voice or hand movements. (hands behind the body)

Session 5:

Restraint in the face of stimuli and contact. In this session we learned about restraint and delaying gratification; I put a hoop on the ground and the dogs sat a few feet away from it. The children at around the hoop and each child in turn, will throw a snack into the hoop while maintaining eye contact with the dog - saying the command - "stay" while throwing the snack into the hoop. When all the children in the group threw the snack, we all said to the dog the command: "Bon appetite".

Session 6:

Reading dog. In this session we read the book "Putsky" together; the book tells a story about an abandoned dog who is looking for a home and everything goes wrong for him. Each child read a page in turn and without them noticing, worked and improved their reading fluency skills, standing in front of an audience and listening to others and restraint. After finishing reading the book, we talked about the lessons it taught us and how dogs, even the most ragged ones, will always look for a human to take care of them and love them unconditionally. Numerous studies have found that literacy skills can be improved from reading to dogs and that children gain confidence in reading and report an increased love of reading (Fine 2015).

Session 7:

In this session we worked on more complex elements, each child chose what to teach the dogs and figured out what was the best way to teach it - by breaking each element into the different stages, for example: "roll over" - the dog lays on the floor and rolls over. There are four commands that constitute this command: come, sit, down, roll.

Session 8:

In the last session the children experienced an agility course. They took the dogs through various obstacles, jumping through hoops, passing through a tunnel and standing on a chair. In this session we also summarized everything we have learned, all the basic

In conclusion:

In terms of individual development and integration, each child made progress:

J: Overcame her fear of dogs, and made tremendous exertion to fit in and deal with her fear. With the help, patience and perseverance of her teammates, she was able to meet all the tasks.

O: A - J's good friend, came to her aid all the time, helped her physically and mentally to deal with her fear of dogs. O was my little helper, and assisted with everything and everyone who had difficulties.

T: Learned that she does not have to be assertive all the time; she can actually let go and try to have some fun from time to time.

R: Managed to make everyone notice his kindness and gentleness without seeing it as a flaw.

M: Slowly opened up more and more in every session, was less of an outsider towards the end and it was evident that he gained confidence and enjoyed the sessions.

I: managed to make friends with M and R; the trio became bonded thanks to our sessions.

E: When everything went well for him, everything was fine, however, when things did not go the way he wanted he was less cooperative and even erupted in some sessions. It was clear the other kids were aware of his tantrums and when those happened, they all just backed up and gave him space. O managed to bring him back to the session every time and made sure everything and everyone are OK.

A dog in a school is something that people can have very different reactions to. There are those that are all for having a dog in a school, while others are concerned about allergies or possible dog attacks. There is much positive research on the benefit of therapy dogs in an education setting and yet, "the majority of elementary, middle and high schools have yet to fully tap into this tremendous tool that can greatly serve its students." (Charlotte's Litter, 2014, para.4). The group experience was very challenging and interesting, the dogs had a positive effect on the children and managed to produce better communication between them, tolerance and patience, meeting physical and mental challenges, a sense of success and personal and group empowerment. The dogs managed to pleasantly surprise us at each new meeting, when they learned and taught all of the above, treated each child with maximum sensitivity, in accordance with his and her weaknesses and strengths and created a relaxed, safe, enveloping and entertaining atmosphere.

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