

Animal-Assisted Therapy



What is it?

Pet therapy, or more precisely, animal-assisted therapy (AAT), is the use of companion animals to help people in human physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive functioning. The integration of animal-assisted therapy into clinical psychology was first credited in 1962 to the child psychologist, Boris Levinson, with his paper published in *Mental Hygiene*, "The dog as a 'co-therapist'." Levinson discovered he could make significant progress with a disturbed child when Levinson's dog, Jingles, attended therapy sessions. He went on to find that many children who were withdrawn and uncommunicative would interact positively with the dog (Levinson, 1969). Animal-assisted therapy has a long, but undocumented history, and it has only been in the last half of the twentieth century that research and professional response has been conducted on the use of animals in therapy. Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) and its related modality, Animal-Assisted Activity (AAA), are both experiencing a rise in popularity and are now being applied in many counseling and school settings across the United States.

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is a goal-directed intervention in which an animal meeting specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT is delivered and/or directed by a health/human service provider working within the scope of his or her profession. AAT is provided in a variety of settings and may be group or individual in nature. This process is documented and evaluated.

Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA) provide opportunities for motivational, educational, and/or recreational benefits to enhance quality of life. AAA are delivered in a variety of environments by a specially trained professional, paraprofessional, and/or volunteer in association with animals that meet specific criteria.

How Do Pets Help?

Many people have fond memories of pets or farm animals. Growing up with a furry, affectionate friend is a satisfying part of most persons' childhoods. Many of our abilities to form healthy, adult relationships may stem from our first joyful experiences with pets. Household animals may be treasured pals with whom children can share innermost dreams, secret

thoughts, private moments and companionship during lonely or stressful times. Pets may help teach children the responsibilities of daily living, compassion for other creatures who share our planet, and the cycles of life and death. They may help build self-esteem and self-confidence. Pets are truly common experiences for most people.

Pets are a common denominator in American homes. Pets are dynamic examples of psychological symbiosis: pets need people to care for them, and many people love to care for pets. Medical practitioners, veterinarians, health care professionals and others in many different fields are tapping this unique pet-people bond for its potential therapeutic value.

The American Veterinary Medical Association estimates that 59.1 million cats, 52.9 million dogs, 12.6 million birds, 4 million horses, 24 million fish, and millions of other pets share our homes. Households with pets are overwhelmingly likely to be parents with children. The rate of pet ownership is four times higher in the U.S. than in industrialized nations of Europe and five times higher than Japan.

In one study, 90% of pet owners said their pet was "extremely important" or "very important" to them. 87% considered their pets members of the family, 50% kept pictures of their pets at home or work or in their billfolds, and 50% allowed their pets to sleep with family members. 15% celebrated their pets' birthdays. In an age of where traditional extended families are disappearing, 79% of pet owners said that sometimes their pet was their closest companion.

Animals in a home may help against loneliness and depression. They may add a sense of safety and protection. They may encourage physical activity and social interaction with one's neighbors. They can be outlets of hobbies and opportunities for club interests. The responsibilities and daily rituals of care may provide a touchstone of reality. They may divert one's cares and troubles.

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For example, close to half of the psychiatrists, psychologists, and family practice physicians responding to a survey conducted by Kal Kan pet foods reported that they have prescribed pets for their patients to combat loneliness, depression, and other emotional problems including inactivity and stress. In a random sampling, 57% of psychiatrists, 48% of psychologists, and 40% of family practice physicians reported recommending animals for companionship, to provide unconditional affection and warmth, to provide a focus or perspective, amusement, and a feeling of being needed.

Pets have frequently been described as non-threatening and non-judgmental companions. The presence of pets in a household seems to contribute to the development of children's trust and self-esteem. Pets have also been observed to contribute to the development of ego strength in people in institutions.

Professionals See Success With AAT

Suzanne Reinhart, a Professional School Counselor at Noble Elementary School, Tiffin, Ohio, uses the school's Golden Retriever therapy dog Magic everyday. Magic acts as a teacher's aide and helps students with reading and math lessons. Magic also helps Mrs. Reinhart with individual therapy with the students. Some parents have said that their kids want to come to school because of Magic. He is reported to be a comfort to the kids and a welcome relief from the stress of school. "Since last April, this has been a highly successful program," according to Mrs. Reinhart. "Even the principal, who is not a dog lover, strongly supports the program and validates its success," she adds.

Shelley Wanner, LPC, NCC, NCSC and Jackie Boyd, School Counselors at Bryan Middle School, Bryan, Ohio, utilize Allie, the school-owned Golden Retriever as a co-therapist. Allie provides unconditional acceptance the moment the student enters the classroom or the counselor's office. Often the students will come to see the dog and stay to talk to the counselor while they pet and play with the dog. When animals are used with the school counselor, the students often use the dog as an excuse to go see the counselor. These animals enable the counselor to interact with many more students than would normally be the case.

Allie belongs to the students and staff at the school, not to an individual. She is not a typical "visiting" therapy dog that is utilized in schools and other facilities. "Our program truly is 'cutting edge' use of a therapy dog. It is very effective, not just in individual therapeutic situations, but also in setting a welcoming, warm, caring atmosphere inside the school

building," said Mrs. Wanner. Allie has been with the school since January 2005.

AAT is Now at Key Life Directions

Key Life Directions is please to introduce its new Animal-Assisted Therapy program featuring Caleb, Golden Retriever, and Gracie, Teacup Poodle. Both of these therapy dogs have received training from Assistance Dogs of America, Inc., in Swanton, Ohio. Caleb is the newest addition, and thoroughly enjoys being a loving companion to the visitors of Key Life Directions. Gracie has been with the organization for several years and has helped numerous clients overcome problems and lead a more productive life.

In addition to the therapy dogs, Key Life Directions has partnered with an Equine-Facilitated Therapy group, Project H.O.P. E. (Horses Opening People's Eyes) in Bowling Green, Ohio. Sandra Tebbe, owner of Project Hope, is a professional clinical Counselor, a Licensed Independent Chemical Dependency Counselor, and a Certified Therapeutic Riding Instructor through the North American Riding for Handicapped Association (NARHA).

Therapy dogs become a co-therapist and part of the treatment team. They are natural teachers since their social behaviors often mimic those of humans. People find it easy to attach to animals because they show affection and can be trusted. They can facilitate healing of grief issues because their unconditional love fills the emptiness caused by loss. While interacting with animals, any negative patterns or thoughts may be challenged and replaced by positive affirmations. This process helps decrease anxiety and depression while enhancing self-awareness, self-esteem and creating an atmosphere of success.

Please call us if you would like more information on our Animal-Assisted Therapy program. *We can help.*



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