

Exploring Animal-Assisted Programs with Children in School and Therapeutic Contexts

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Abstract Animal-Assisted programs with children are becoming increasingly popular in school and therapeutic settings. This article provides an overview of the benefits accrued by children as well as the concerns with programs which involve animals, and therapy dogs in particular, in these environments. Research over the past 30 years indicates that therapy dogs may offer physiological, emotional, social, and physical support for children. The distinguishing features of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) are characterized by the supplemental inclusion of a trained therapy dog in reaching an intervention goal in therapeutic environments, and as a supplement to an educational objective in school contexts. The general assumptions underlying AAT with children are that although therapy dogs are interactive, children seem to perceive them as non-judgmental participants who are outside of the complications and expectations of human relationships. This unique interaction may offer children a valuable form of social and emotional support in educational and therapeutic settings.

Keywords Animal-assisted therapy · Supporting research · Children · School · Therapy dogs

Introduction

Tango, the little white therapy dog, wags her tail in greeting on the school patio as two 5-year-old students prepare to engage in this afternoon's activities with their

speech therapist. Today, the concrete is strewn with a series of colourful shapes with pairs of rhyming word cards placed on top of each (e.g., 'sat' and 'cat'). The children concentrate on saying each of the words correctly, and then get to lift up each colourful shape to see if a paper bone is hidden underneath. In what seems to be a happy trot, Tango follows the students along the trail and sits in anticipation as the children focus on their words. If they find a bone, the children ask the dog to sit (they are working on the initial consonant *s*) to give her a treat. The students squeal with delight as they give Tango her reward, and they then run to the next shape, seemingly eager to demonstrate to Tango how well they are able to pronounce their words. Their conversation and efforts are punctuated by persistent efforts to maintain Tango's attention: "Look Tango, this is the letter *s*. It says *ssss*. See Tango?! We got that one right!" The teacher marvels at how focused and attentive the children are as they complete this task. When one of the children is asked what they like about having Tango participating in their lessons, she looks at the adult incredulously and asks: "Don't you know?! She's a really good listener!"

Supporting Research for Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) with Children

Anecdotes such as these are becoming increasingly common in educational and therapeutic environments as innovative programs are developed to assist children in their learning in increasingly varied and creative ways. But does the research support what seems to be largely anecdotal evidence of how therapy animals may uniquely support children's learning and development? Much of what we know today about the benefits for children when they

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