Aug 18th, 10:00 AM - 11:30 AM

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Canine-assisted Therapy: How it can Provide Social and Health Benefits to Patients with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Nadia Sarnecki, MSN, BA

Background

Over the years, there have been major developments that assist with the improvement of social skills and health among patients with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and canine-assisted therapy is one of them. Access to therapeutic resources such as canine-assisted therapy has introduced an inspiring, motivating, and furry new way for providing social and health benefits in patients with ASD in the hospital setting.

Objectives

The primary purpose this integrative review is to highlight the areas of research that have assessed the areas of social functioning positively affected by canine-assisted therapy and health benefits as a result of canine-assisted therapy in patients with ASD.

This study will examine canine-assisted therapy and how it can provide social and health benefits for patients with ASD using an integrative review of the literature. An integrative review uses a broad spectrum of existing qualitative and quantitative literature to introduce new knowledge about a specific topic (Ebling Library, 2016). The content from these studies all addressed related, if not identical, hypothesis. This method is appropriate for this research study because subjectivity is minimized in the literature giving it clarity and credibility.

The literature review was completed based on material from the following databases: PsycINFO, PubMed and CINAHL. The searched terms included “ASD,” “canine-assisted therapy,” “dog therapy,” “animal therapy,” “social skills,” “health benefits,” and “oxytocin.” All of the databases were searched within 2005 to 2016.

Findings

Areas of social functioning positively affected by canine-assisted therapy in patients with ASD:

- Increase in social interaction and communication
- Specific social criteria that has been studied and observed in relation to improved social interaction and communication include ability to introduce oneself, ask appropriate questions, and respond to other people’s questions, social skills known to be a challenge for individuals with ASD (Bush et al., 2016).
- Decrease in problem behaviors
- A study performed by Calcuttara et al. (2013), examined 40 post-operative pediatric patients, including participants with ASD, in which half of the participants had a 20-minute canine-assisted therapy session after their surgery, while the other half did not. The findings indicated that the participants with ASD who were given 20-minutes of canine-assisted therapy post-operation showed an increase in attention and positive behaviors.

Health benefits as a result of canine-assisted therapy in patients with ASD:

- Decreased levels of cortisol; therefore, decreased levels of stress
- Decrease in problem behaviors
- A study performed by Viau et al. (2010), examined the levels of cortisol in 42 children with ASD prior to and during the introduction of a service dog, and a short period of time after the dog was removed from the child’s environment. Results indicated that there was a 10% decrease in cortisol levels during the child’s introduction with the service dog.

- Lower pain perception
- A study performed by Calcuttara et al. (2013), examined 40 post-operative pediatric patients, including participants with ASD, in which half of the participants had a 20-minute canine-assisted therapy session after their surgery, while the other half did not. The findings indicated that the patients who were exposed to a 20-minute canine-assisted therapy session rated lower in pain perception and maintained lower blood pressure as compared to the other group.

- Blood pressure readings within normal range
- See Calcuttara et al. (2015) study above

Nursing Implications

A nurse’s role is described as meeting the total needs of the patient (Amos, 2001). Nurses play a very important role when it comes to providing patient and family support. Such support systems may include, social work, physical therapy, occupational therapy and canine-assisted therapy. This team approach will increase the quality of care for the child with ASD and family.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in the year 2000 the identified prevalence of ASD was 1 in 150 children. In 2010, the number of children diagnosed with ASD jumped to 1 in 68 (CDC, 2015). Having said that, the likelihood of nurses getting assigned to take care of someone with ASD is quite high. Since there is no simple or universal answer to know how to communicate or comfort an individual with ASD in the healthcare setting, nurses need to be educated and aware of the resources available to them. Canine-assisted therapy is one form of therapeutic intervention that may help achieve positive health outcomes for patients who have ASD.

Conclusion

Canine-assisted therapy positively affects areas of social functioning, as well as health benefits, in patients with ASD. The results from a variety of research studies show that patients with ASD are sensitive to the presence of canines, which in turn, help us understand and support the theory that canine-assisted therapy has a direct impact on social and health benefits for this population.

While there has been extensive research on ASD, the concept of canine-assisted therapy providing social and health benefits to individuals with ASD has not been the focus of a majority of empirical or theoretical research. For future development of canine-assisted therapy, more public exposure, accessibility to canines for therapeutic purposes and empirical studies will generate more research on the benefits associated with canine-assisted therapy and how it can provide social and health benefits to individuals with ASD. Given the nature of this concept, longitudinal methods for research should be used to prove the continuous development of social skills and health benefits in patients with ASD.

References


“A behavior is communication. Change the environment and behaviors will change.” – Lana David

Method

This research project is an integrative review of the literature. The literature review was completed based on material from the following databases: PsycINFO, PubMed and CINAHL. The searched terms included “autism,” “autism spectrum disorder,” “ASD,” “canine-assisted therapy,” “dog therapy,” “animal therapy,” “social skills,” “health benefits,” and “oxytocin.” All of the databases were searched within 2005 to 2016. The literature was reviewed for themes on improvement of social skills and health benefits in individuals with ASD related to canine-assisted therapy. The results revealed similar definitions on the term “autism spectrum disorder.” This concept analysis will provide literature from the field of psychology and medicine. A total of 7 articles have been integrated into this literature.