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Effects of Animal-Assisted Therapy Among Children with Mental Health Disorders

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Effects of Animal Assisted Therapy in Children with Mental Health Disorders

Background

- Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is the use of the human-animal bond through strategically chosen, goal-directed, animal-assisted interventions in which the animal is the core component of the treatment.
- AAT is used by professionals who have been certified to use animals in a therapeutic manner either in a group or individual setting and all physical, emotional, and social progress is recorded.

Purpose

To use current research to examine outcomes associated with AAT used in adjunct with or in place of traditional therapy and their effects on children diagnosed with mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and socialization disorders.

Methods

Research Design

An integrative literature review was conducted based on the Whittemore and Knafl framework.

Search Methods

Research databases used consisted of Cumulative Index to Nursing and Health Literature (CINAHL), ProQuest, PsychInfo, and PubMed. Several multiple text combinations were used in the search. Some of the key words include: *animal-assisted therapy, mental health, children, complimentary intervention, clinical depression, mood disorders, mood disorder interventions, anxiety-relief, socialization.*

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Eight articles found within the nursing and psychology databases through DePaul University Library were reviewed, analyzed, and put into subgroups: depression, anxiety, and socialization.

Findings

AAT can be very useful for children with mental health conditions. It is also beneficial in a variety of settings and among children of different ages.

AAT Effects

Depression:

- subjects participating in AAT who were diagnosed with depression experienced significant reduction in depressive symptoms
- Children participating in AAT with dogs and horses had decreased sudden mood changes, were less impulsive in their behavior, and had less atypical thinking
- Children with depression after experiencing sexual abuse showed reductions in depression and PTSD symptoms after working with a therapy dog

Anxiety:

- Caregivers of children with anxiety associated with PTSD described their children as being more settled, slept better, and were less anxious
- Children participating in AAT had lower anxiety scores, but there was no significant difference between groups on level of anxiety

Socialization:

- Children engaging with horses for AAT had increased abilities in social-emotional competencies
- After working with a therapy dog, children reported changes in social interaction skills with adults and other children
- Children undergoing inpatient psychiatric therapy found that working with a therapy dog increased desire for social contact and exchange and enabled the child become psychologically well-balanced.



Discussion

- AAT is a structured, yet highly flexible way to reduce manifestations of mental health disorders in children
- AAT is safe and very cost-effective because most animal-assisted therapy teams are all volunteers
- AAT is efficient as it is mainly applied in group settings
- For children who like animals, this may be a more acceptable alternative to the typical therapeutic programs
- A way to satisfy the health consumers' increasing interest in complementary and integrative approaches to care.

Nursing Implications

- Nurses should consider AAT as a means to help promote optimum health within their patients psychologically and physiologically.
- Nurses should educate other health professionals on the effects of AAT in children with mental health disorders
- Nurses should educate caregivers on the effects of AAT as another form of treatment

Conclusion

Although the results of the current literature review are promising, the common theme that exists among the articles reviewed is that there is a need for further evidence in the effects of AAT on children with mental health conditions. Further research is needed to evaluate how long the positive effects of AAT last, the amount of therapy needed to produce a durable effect, and ways to extend the benefits beyond the therapy setting. Therefore, the answer to the question is AAT effective for children with mental health conditions cannot be answered right now. The findings thus far are promising, and present impact under certain conditions, populations, and procedures.