

Animal Assisted Interventions Fact Sheet

Among the earliest proponents of animal-assisted work with children was Boris Levinson whose dog Jingles in 1960 served as his "co-therapist," helping him to develop a trusting relationship with his young clients. Since then the number and type of interventions that pair people with animals have grown rapidly. Although these interventions share the inclusion of an animal, they differ with respect to the role of the animal.

- **Animal assisted therapy** is a formal part of the treatment process provided by a health or human service professional. The animal's inclusion in the therapeutic process is intended to improve the client's physical, social, emotional and/or cognitive functioning.
- **Animal assisted education** is a structured intervention that includes specific academic goals and is provided by a teacher or other education professional.
- **Animal assisted activities** are designed to improve participants' quality of life. The animals are intended to provide motivation, education, or recreation, and the activities can be provided by professionals or nonprofessionals. There are no treatment goals for the interactions.

Settings, Client Populations, and Types of Animals

Animal assisted interventions are being integrated into a wide variety of settings, including schools, health care facilities, mental health practices, nursing homes, secure detention facilities for juveniles and adults, disaster response settings, and animal welfare organizations. Program participants vary widely and include people of all ages, children with autism, veterans diagnosed with PTSD, children with learning disabilities, at-risk youth, incarcerated adults, and people living in nursing homes or assisted living facilities. Dogs and horses are commonly integrated into AAIs, but a variety of other animals may be included such as fish, hamsters, guinea pigs, rabbits, cats, and farm animals.

A Growing Body of Research

While research is growing on AAIs, more rigorous studies must be done to evaluate outcomes for both the people and animals participating in these interventions. A number of organizations (e.g., Animal Assisted Interventions International, International Organization of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations) have drafted guidelines and standards to ensure the well-being of both the people and animals involved with AAIs, but more work must be done to evaluate both the extent to which these guidelines are followed and program effectiveness. Findings to date on the effects of AAIs on people include:

- A therapy dog has a positive effect on patients' pain level and satisfaction with their hospital stay following total joint arthroplasty (Harper, 2014).ⁱ
- Fibromyalgia patients spending time with a therapy dog instead of in an outpatient waiting area at a pain management facility showed significant improvements in pain, mood, and other measures of distress (Marcus, 2013).ⁱⁱ
- A walking program that matched sedentary adults with dogs resulted in an increase in walking over a 52-week period. Participants reported their motivation for adherence was “the dogs need us to walk them” (Johnson, 2010).ⁱⁱⁱ
- The presence of an animal can significantly increase positive social behaviors among children with autism spectrum disorder (O’Haire, 2013).^{iv}

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1. ⁱ Harper CM, Dong Y, Thornhill TS, et al. Can therapy dogs improve pain and satisfaction after total joint arthroplasty? A randomized controlled trial. *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research*® 2014;**473**(1):372-79.
 2. ⁱⁱ Marcus DA, Bernstein CD, Constantin JM, et al. Impact of Animal-Assisted Therapy for Outpatients with Fibromyalgia. *Pain Medicine* 2013;**14**(1):43-51.
 3. ⁱⁱⁱ Johnson RA, Meadows RL. Dog-walking: Motivation for adherence to a walking program. *Clinical Nursing Research*, 19(4), 387-402
 4. ^{iv} O’Haire ME, McKenzie SJ, Beck AM, Slaughter V (2013). Social Behaviors Increase in Children with Autism in the Presence of Animals Compared to Toys. *PLoS ONE* 8(2): e57010. Doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0057010

