

Critical Review: Is animal-assisted therapy (AAT) associated with improved communication outcomes for individuals with communication disorders?

Kelsey Moore-Nielsen
M.Ci.Sc (SLP) Candidate
Western University School of Communication Sciences and Disorders

This study reports a critical review of the literature on the outcomes of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) for individuals with communication disorders. Five articles, including one randomized controlled trial, two single-subject designs, and two systematic reviews, were included for review. Overall, the results of this review provide evidence ranging from slightly to highly suggestive that AAT leads to positive outcomes for those with communication disorders. Implications for clinical practice and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Introduction

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is therapy that involves interaction with a certified therapy animal as a form of treatment. Current evidence suggests that AAT may be effective in improving overall mental health, eliminating a sense of isolation, and improving quality of life in disorders such as depression, schizophrenia, and addiction (Kamioka et al., 2014). The negative health outcomes associated with these disorders that may be ameliorated by AAT may also apply to communication disorders. Decreases in mental health and quality of life, as well as social isolation are all factors that may be present in individuals with communication disorders. For example, social isolation has been demonstrated after the onset of aphasia, where shrinkage in social networks and decreased contact with communication partners has been reported (Vickers, 2010). Teenagers with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder report having a low quality of communication life (Burgess & Turkstra, 2010), and receptive language difficulties have been associated with psychosocial problems in children with hearing impairment (Hogan, Shipley, Strazdins, Purcell, & Baker, 2011).

present the same communication pressure as another person does, possibly motivating the client to interact more without fear of failure.

Objectives

The primary objective of this paper was to outline and critically evaluate studies that examined AAT as an intervention method for various types of communication disorders.

Methods

Search Strategy

Online databases including Scopus, CINAHL, and EBSCO were searched using the following search strategy: (aphasia OR dementia OR communication disorders OR autism) AND (animal assisted therapy). There were no limitations placed on this search.

Selection Criteria

Articles identified for inclusion included those that focused on the communication outcomes of AAT when administered to participants with diagnosis of any of the communication disorders listed above. Articles excluded from review included those that did not provide adequate description of their analysis for critical appraisal.

Data Collection

The articles reviewed for this paper consisted of studies that involved participants with various diagnoses. These include: autism spectrum disorder (ASD), aphasia, language impairment, dementia, and other nonspecified mental or physical disabilities that are associated with communication difficulties. The

Increasing quality of life and mental health, and decreasing social isolation may have direct benefits on things like social communication, or indirect benefits on meeting speech or language goals due to reduction of interference of these negative factors on performance in therapy. This question has potential clinical implications as clients may be reluctant to communicate with a speech-language pathologist or other skilled communication partner because of low self-efficacy or anxiety surrounding making an error. Using animals in speech and language therapy may provide a living being to interact with.

study designs consisted of one quasirandomised control trial, various single subject designs and two systematic reviews.

Results

Breitenback, Stumpf, Fersen, & Ebert (2009) examined whether dolphin assisted therapy (DAT) improved the communicative ability, social behaviour, and parent-child interactions among children with severe disabilities. Their secondary objective was to compare the effects of their DAT program which

continuations during the AAT sessions than during the other two treatment conditions. Due to the inappropriate analysis applied to the results of this study, as well a

more motivated and satisfied by AAT than traditional therapy should be further explored. These findings are clinically important due to the ongoing challenge of finding interventions that clients are motivated by, are satisfied with, and yield positive results, especially when it comes to social communication.

Due to its clinical implications and suggestively positive results, future research on AAT is warranted.
Future research