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Animal-Assisted Therapy

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Animals can be great companions to kids and adults alike. Animals show both loyalty and love. They can help in different situations by assisting you with a task, alerting you to danger, or protecting you from harm. The special bond between humans and animals is one of comfort, acceptance, and warmth—all reasons why animals make great pets and great “assistants” in therapy.



Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) utilizes animals in the therapeutic process. Animals can provide motivation and decrease stress for individuals as they work to improve skills like walking (physical therapy), self-care (occupational therapy), and speaking fluently (speech therapy). In these goal-directed therapies and other such therapies, “an animal is incorporated as an integral part of the clinical

health-care treatment process” (American Humane Association, 2009, para. 2).



Animal-assisted activities (AAA) are other ways animals help humans. These activities are different from AAT because they are not goal-directed therapies. Instead, they are activities that aim to enhance quality of life—for example, taking the animal(s) to meet and greet people to brighten their day or to do a demonstration in front of a group of people (Delta Society, 2009, para. 23). Professionals, paraprofessionals, or volunteers provide these “motivational, educational, and recreational benefits” (American Humane Association, 2009, para. 1). Some places you might see AAA are hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, mental-health facilities, and schools.

It is important to note that AAT and AAA animals are different from service animals. Service animals, such as dogs for the blind, do “guide, mobility, sound alert, and medical alert/response work” (Delta Society, 2009, para. 25).

What Animals Can Be Animal-Assisted Therapy Animals?

In order for an animal to be AAT eligible, it is necessary to go through a screening process. In addition to being healthy, it is important that the animal is “calm, friendly, well-behaved, and at least a year old” and acts relaxed and confident around strangers (Collier Cool, 2009, para. 12). Other characteristics that make an animal good for this work are that the animal is “controllable, reliable, and predictable” (Delta Society, 2009, para. 6). The animals need to know how to work around different



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therapy equipment and such items as wheelchairs and IVs. It is equally important that the animal-assisted therapy provider has training, including infection control, for this unique component of therapy. Having liability insurance is critical as well. You can learn more at: <http://www.deltasociety.org/>

What Are Some Ways Animal-Assisted Therapy Can Help People?

Animals that are part of a therapy program can help individuals feel comfortable and feel less pressure to perform tasks. Animals are nonjudgmental, so their presence may help ease some of the anxiety that comes with practicing

different skills. The animals can also help as individuals work through difficult emotional times. They can also help individuals learn patience with the animal and care skills for the animal. As they work on these skills you may see transfer of this care and compassion to other areas of life. As well, dealing with animals may help people with sensory issues tolerate the presence of an animal in the room and regulate his/her emotions accordingly.



Collier Cool (2009) indicates that there are over 30,000 therapy dogs in the U.S.—these dogs can help kids who struggle with dyslexia, stuttering, or extreme shyness; individuals in the court system (victims of domestic violence for example); and those with ADHD (p. 13). These dogs can help people interact physically and emotionally. Another great way animals can provide assistance is with children who struggle to read. Reading to a trained dog instead of another person can decrease some of the stress and anxiety that children who struggle to read might feel. You can find more information at: <http://www.therapyanimals.org>

Resources:

American Humane Association. (2009). *Animal-assisted therapy*. Retrieved from <http://www.americanhumane.org/human-animal-bond/programs/animal-assisted-therapy/>

Collier Cool, L. (2009). The dog who changes lives. *Parade*, September 6, p. 13.

Delta Society. (2009). *Pet partners program FAQs*. Retrieved from <http://www.deltasociety.org/Page.aspx?pid=267>



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