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Animal-Assisted Therapy In Elementary Schools

Steve Kurschner

A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Master of Science Degree in

Counselor Education at

Winona State University

Spring 2014

Winona State University  
College of Education  
Counselor Education Department

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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CAPSTONE PROJECT

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Animal-Assisted Therapy In Elementary Schools

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Steven J. Kurschner

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science Degree in

Counselor Education

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### **Abstract**

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is becoming increasingly popular in school and therapeutic settings across the country (Friesen, 2010). In animal-assisted therapy (AAT), a certified therapy animal works in partnership with the counselor and/or the dog handler to provide a positive and therapeutic school environment. In this literature review, topics that are discussed include: AAT qualifications that distinguish AAT from other animal-related activities, the history of AAT, the congruence of AAT practices in theories of counseling, benefits and concerns of animal-assisted therapy, examples of AAT in classroom and counseling settings, how to establish and implement an AAT program, therapy animal considerations, and opportunities in Southwest Wisconsin for individuals who wish to enroll in animal-assisted therapy training.

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**Introduction**

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is becoming increasingly popular in school and therapeutic settings across the country (Friesen, 2010). Animal-assisted therapy programs in schools incorporate certified therapy animals into school counseling sessions and educational curriculums (Chandler, Portrie-Bethke, Minton, Fernando & O'Callaghan, 2010). In animal-assisted therapy (AAT), a certified therapy animal works in partnership with the counselor and/or the dog handler to provide a positive and unique school environment for students.

Although there is much evidence illustrating the positive effects animal-assisted therapy has in counseling and classroom settings (Chitic, Rusu & Szamoskozi, 2012), there are still individuals who have general concerns regarding animals in schools. Individuals who hold negative beliefs towards AAT often have misconceptions about AAT theory and practice in schools. To better inform individuals about the application of AAT practices in counseling and academic settings, this author will discuss the AAT qualifications that distinguish AAT from other animal related activities, the history of AAT, and the congruence of AAT practices in theories of counseling. The benefits and concerns of animal-assisted therapy, examples of AAT in classroom and counseling settings, how to establish and implement an AAT program, therapy animal considerations, local opportunities for individuals who wish to enroll in animal-assisted therapy training in Southwestern Wisconsin and my personal experience with AAT in schools will also be discussed.

**What is Animal-Assisted Therapy?**

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) programs partner counselors with certified therapy animals to provide a compassionate and stimulating environment to assist in human client recovery (Chandler et al., 2010). Animal assisted therapy programs are designed to promote improvement in client's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive functioning. AAT is not just simply bringing in a dog to "break the ice" with a client either; AAT is a goal-directed intervention in which an animal is an integral part of the treatment process (Chitic et al., 2012). An example of using AAT in counseling is to have a child tell a story about why the therapy animal feels happy or sad. The dog now becomes a tool for the client to project upon as the child's response may give a counselor insight as to how she or he perceives the world.

Animals can be brought into schools or therapy sessions for many different reasons or objectives; for instance, a teacher may bring a hamster and a gecko into the classroom to show students similarities and differences between reptiles and mammals. The previous example does not describe animal-assisted therapy. Animal-assisted activities provide opportunities for motivational, educational, and recreational goals. Another distinction between animal-assisted activities and AAT is that animal-assisted activities are often offered to a group of children on a short-term basis, whereas AAT is mostly planned for individual children longitudinally, as part of a curriculum (Jalongo et al., 2004). Animal-assisted activities show reliable positive changes in student behavior (Jalongo, Astorino & Bomboy, 2004); however, these activities are not to be confused with AAT.

Animal-assisted therapy is also closely related with animal-assisted education. Animal-assisted education is a goal-directed intervention with a certified therapy animal that aims to improve specific educational aspects of students. An example of an animal-assisted education practice would be to have a student read short stories to a certified therapy animal. Animal-assisted education and AAT are often classified under the same practice as they both are goal-directed and require that the animals are highly trained and certified as therapy animals. A distinguishable feature of AAT from other activities with animals is that AAT is characterized by the supplemental inclusion of a certified therapy animal in reaching an intervention goal in counseling environments and a supplement of specific educational objectives in classroom settings (Friesen, 2010). In the current manuscript, this author will classify animal-assisted education as a part of AAT practices.

### **Why Dogs? Animals In AAT**

Animal assisted therapy capitalizes on the natural bond most humans have with animals (Geiest, 2011). There are many different species of animals that are used in animal assisted therapy. Two predominant species of animals that are used across the nation in AAT are canines (i.e., therapy dogs), and horses (i.e., Hippotherapy; Geiest, 2011). The rest of this literature review will focus on the use of therapy dogs in AAT programs in school counseling sessions and in classroom settings in our current discussion.

Most young children have a natural affinity for animals, particularly dogs (Jalongo, 2005). Some children may have a dog at home, and it would not be



unusual for a child to curl up with a family pet while reading or relaxing at home. AAT brings a comforting, familiar connection into the school setting.

Animal-assisted therapy is founded on two main principles. The first is that children naturally have a tendency to be more social in the presence of animals; and secondly, animals have a stress-moderating effect on children. Empirical research also shows that the presence of a mellow dog tends to reduce the physical and psychological stress of children (Jalongo et al., 2004). When a child is in the presence of a calm dog, the child begins to have a reduction in heart rate, lowered blood pressure, and a reduction in other observable signs of anxiety (Jalongo et al., 2004; Coulee Region Humane Society, 2012). Children with a dog by their side have been found to have significantly lower behavioral, emotional, and verbal distress when participating in mildly stressful activities, such as being an elementary student and having to present a project in front of the class (Friesen, 2010). In fact, the presence of a calm, attentive dog moderates the stress response of a child more significantly than the presence of an adult or a supportive friend of the child (Friesen, 2010).

As previously stated, the presence of a dog also elicits sociability among students. Research suggests that the presence of a dog can support the goals of class inclusion in schools. In one study of peer interaction, researchers found that a child who does not have a disability was ten times more likely to interact with another child who is differently-abled when the child was accompanied by a dog (Jalongo et al., 2004). Therefore, in a social environment such as a school setting, students may

benefit from the use of therapy dogs to create a common interest for social experiences to occur between individuals who are seemingly different.

There are even more benefits for children when they experience working alongside a dog. One of the main tenets of utilization of therapy dogs in AAT practices is for children to perceive dogs to be a non-judgmental participant in counseling and classroom settings (Coulee Region Humane Society, 2012; Friesen, 2010; Jalongo et al., 2004). Having a non-judgmental participant in the school setting can provide a child with a unique and valuable form of social and emotional support (Friesen, 2010). Bringing an animal into a school context also serves as an attention-getting stimulus and an object of conversation among students (Heimlich, 2001). Students tend to become happy and excited when they have an opportunity to interact with animals, especially dogs (Geiest, 2011).

### **History of Animal-Assisted Therapy**

Animal-assisted therapy is a newer trend in counseling professions, although the idea of animals assisting in the therapeutic process has been around for hundreds of years. Florence Nightingale, who lived in the 1800's and had a significant influence in the nursing profession, suggested that a small pet would make an excellent companion for sick patients when she visited hospitals, especially chronically ill patients (Jalongo et al., 2004). Individuals were able to observe a unique bond between animals and humans then, but it was not until the 1960's that the field of AAT would emerge.

In 1962, an American psychologist named Boris Levinson found that he could reach a troubled child more easily in therapy sessions, when his dog "Jingles" was

present (Chitic et al., 2012; Friesen, 2010; Heimlich, 2001). Boris began to increasingly utilize his dog in therapy sessions with children, and has been credited as being the first person who officially used an animal as an integral part of goal-orientated counseling (Chitic et al., 2012). Early pet therapy programs that implemented Levinson's findings were often staffed by volunteers who brought in their own pets into hospitals, nursing homes, and other long-term care facilities on a regular basis (Heimlich, 2001). As AAT grew in therapy settings, organizations have developed and provided recommendations for animals and handlers to consider before applying AAT practices; thereby, standardizing a series of programs and tests that must be completed by both animal and handlers to be awarded proper therapy certification (Coulee Region Humane Society, 2012). Research has shown that since Levinson's discovery, therapy dogs have provided a unique and positive environment that offers physiological, emotional, social, and physical support for children (Friesen, 2010).

### **Application of Animal-Assisted Therapy in Counseling Theories**

Animal-assisted therapy practices are very flexible and can be applied with a variety of counseling theories (Chandler et al., 2010). Regardless of the theoretical approach taken when applying AAT practices, research suggests that animals have a positive influence on a child's well-being (Friesen, 2010). The following examples of how AAT practices can be implemented in different counseling theories illustrates how universal ATT application can be integrated in the counseling process.

In cognitive-behavioral counseling, the primary focus of the counseling session is to identify and challenge irrational beliefs that the client holds, which

contribute to maladaptive feelings and behaviors (Chandler et al., 2010). Methods of cognitive-behavioral counseling include identifying and challenging irrational beliefs, changing communication styles, developing new social and relationship skills, and modeling or role-playing new behaviors. To facilitate discussion with a client, a counselor who uses cognitive-behavioral therapy can apply AAT techniques to build client rapport and to enhance the trust of a client (Chandler et al., 2010; Jalongo, 2005). Successful interactions between a client and a therapy dog can enhance the client's self-esteem and confidence (Heimlich, 2001). Counselors can also use a therapy dog to assist a client in role-playing and practicing new social skills (Chandler et al., 2010); this is especially effective because dogs are viewed by clients as non-judgmental figures and as figures who will not degrade a client for not being able to role-play (Friesen, 2010). Client's who struggle to perform role-playing tasks or social skills with humans can be asked to practice the skill with a therapy dog first, which may make the interaction much more fun and less threatening than practicing with another person (Chandler et al, 2010). The counselor may also use the therapy dog as an object upon which the client can project a story. This allows the counselor to assess thoughts for irrational patterns and negative self-talk.

In behavioral counseling, the main goal of the counseling session is to improve a client's quality of life by altering behavior that restricts the client from social, occupational, and or other important life activities (Chandler et al., 2010). Operant conditioning is a psychological tenant of behavioral counseling that examines the rewards and punishments people receive as a consequence of their

behavior and how receiving these consequences influences future behavior (Chandler et al., 2010; Thorndike, 1911). Counselors who believe in behavioral counseling theory can use AAT and interactions with a therapy dog as motivational stimulus to encourage a student to engage in appropriate behavior. As stated, many children find that petting, playing, or performing with an animal is fun and rewarding (Coulee Region Humane Society, 2012; Jalango et al., 2004). The use of interactions with a therapy animal as a behavioral reward for a student is consistent with the use of positive reinforcement in operant conditioning to increase the target of positive student behavior. Likewise, removal of an opportunity to work with the therapy animal will act as a negative punishment, decreasing the likelihood of future problematic behavior. Behavioral counselors can also comment on how the therapy dog positively interacts with others, which can be an effective model to show students appropriate behavior and a friendly partner with which to practice (Chandler et al., 2010). Students often want to have the therapy dog do tricks while interacting with the animal. For older students, the play and reward sequence of interactions between the student and the dog provides a hands on example, illustrating how our own actions are influenced by rewards and consequences; much like the therapy dog's behavior of performing a trick to be rewarded by its motivation such as a treat.

In person-centered counseling theory, the counselor approaches the client with unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1980; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012). The goal of the therapy sessions is to promote client's trust in one's self by providing an accepting, warm, genuine, and empathetic environment

(Chandler et al., 2010). A therapy dog is a friendly and sociable companion that is accepting and lovable towards clients; therefore, this calming presence contributes to a client's understanding of unconditional positive regard and a safe therapeutic environment (Chandler et al., 2010; Friesen, 2010; Geiest, 2011). Reflecting and clarifying are also important aspects of person-centered therapy. These skills can be useful therapeutically as they are accomplished through AAT practices when a client can use the therapy dog to reflect on his or her relationship with the animal and also respond to spontaneous interactions between the client and the therapy dog (Chandler et al., 2010).

In the Adlerian theory of counseling, humans are viewed as motivated beings who hold inferiority feelings about themselves that drive them to become successful within the contexts of their family and community; in addition, each individual develops a unique life plan for achieving one's success and satisfaction in one's life (Chandler et al., 2010). To help clients realize their potentially incongruent thought patterns; Adlerian counseling emphasizes social relatedness, which corresponds well with applying AAT practices (Chandler et al., 2010). A therapy dog has an ability to connect and interact with humans. A dog is able to identify and become aware of even the subtlest social cues of people; while humans are able to identify social cues of the animal, making communication between the dog and the human very effective (Heimlich, 2001). In Adlerian counseling AAT can facilitate insight, enhance a client's social and relationship skills, and encourage clients to share their feelings (Chandler et al., 2010). Sharing the therapy animal's history can also be effective in eliciting a client's response, especially if it is a history with which the

client can relate. The following example demonstrates how the therapy dog can be useful in this way:

Children fighting cancer in an oncology unit may become discouraged; however, when a therapy dog and its handler visited the children, they became greatly encouraged. The dog was a three-legged black Labrador, who was also a cancer survivor, made weekly visits to the hospital and lifted the spirits and hope in the young children (Chandler et al., 2010).

### **Benefits of AAT in Elementary Schools**

There are many benefits that are associated with animal-assisted therapy in elementary school settings. Visits from certified therapy dogs in elementary schools offer a unique form of support to children's learning, physical health, and emotional well being (Jalongo et al., 2004). The presence of a therapy dog in an elementary setting improves student socialization, a child's communication skills, task persistence, while also eliciting increased responsiveness and mental alertness of children (Chitic et al., 2012; Heimlich, 2001; Jalongo, 2005). Children who are accompanied by a therapy dog have a reduction in their heart rate, lowered blood pressure, and decreased anxiety (Jalongo et al., 2004; Coulee Region Humane Society, 2012).

Students are not the only ones who benefit from having AAT practices and a therapy dog in elementary schools. Dogs provide social, emotional, and physical benefits for both children and the school staff (Heimlich, 2001). Both teachers and students are often excited to interact with a therapy dog and children are eager to have the dog like them. This is a great way for teachers to instruct students to be

quiet, slow down, and be gentle in the classroom settings, and then they can be asked to apply the behavioral lesson into practice when the therapy dog is present.

An important aspect of AAT is the novelty effect of a therapy dog in the classroom setting. The novelty effect of AAT is just an additional benefit that therapy dogs bring to the elementary school setting. The initial progress of AAT in schools might be affected by student's perception that having a therapy dog in elementary school is something that is new and fun (Chitic et al., 2012). Overall, great improvements are typically shown in reading skills and comprehension and improved peer communication in schools that apply AAT practices (Coulee Region Humane Society, 2012). Other benefits include higher self-esteem, increased levels of confidence, improved student relationships with teachers, peers, and family; this occurs not only in therapy dog sessions, but also in regular education classes as well. Finally, the use of AAT has also been related to improvement in school attendance (Coulee Region Humane Society, 2012).

### **Concerns of AAT in Elementary Schools**

Although there are many benefits to therapy dogs in elementary school settings, some individuals still have concerns about bringing an animal into contact with elementary students. Three major concerns of AAT are a child's fear of animals, sanitary issues of animals, and multicultural concerns.

Learning to interact with a therapy dog in a gentle and quiet manner, learning how to play fair, and how to behave if a student is afraid of dogs are important lessons for students to learn before introducing a dog to an elementary school setting (Friesen, 2010). The fear of dogs is a fear that many children have,



especially at a young age when they may have limited experience with dogs. AAT practices and therapy dogs are a great way to work with children to overcome their fears in a safe environment. Children with a fear of dogs now have a chance to see a gentle dog interact with their friends and classmates. They also see how much their peers enjoy interacting with the dog, and after a short time, the child, who used to have a fear, now wants to interact with the dog as well (Coulee Region Humane Society, 2012).

Cleanliness of dogs is a major concern of some individuals from different cultures, including those from the Middle East and the countries of Southeast Asia. Some cultures perceive dogs to be unclean, and do not wish to have their children be involved with animal related activities (Friesen, 2010). Student allergies are also a major consideration for adults regarding AAT and the use of therapy dogs (Jalongo et al., 2004; Friesen, 2010). It is important to know that therapy dogs are bathed or well groomed, vaccinated, and are treated with an anti-allergen powder immediately before a visit to a school so animal dander, which is the most common source of an allergic reaction, is significantly minimized (Friesen, 2010; Jalongo et al., 2004). Holding AAT sessions outside or in a large ventilated room is a great adaptation to reduce potential student allergy concerns.

Therapy dogs are also trained not to lick or scratch as they complete the classes required to receive therapy dog certification (Jalongo et al., 2004), reducing the likelihood of an infection ever being spread. In rare occurrences, even a highly trained therapy dog may become suddenly ill and vomit, urinate, or defecate in the school or on school property (Jalongo et al., 2004). The handler of the therapy dog

must always be prepared for such an occurrence and is responsible for cleaning up after the animals.

It is important for faculty members who advocate for AAT and wish to incorporate AAT practices into their curriculum to talk with parents who have concerns. Meeting with concerned parents may correct potential misconceptions they may hold about how their children and potential interactions with the therapy dog to provide an accurate description of how AAT is used and the precautions that are taken prior to introducing a therapy dog in an elementary school setting.

### **Animal-Assisted Therapy and Academic Development**

As previously mentioned, there are numerous benefits to elementary students who are working alongside a therapy dog including improvement in student socialization, communication skills, task persistence, and increased responsiveness and mental alertness of children (Chitic et al., 2012; Heimlich, 2001; Jalongo, 2005). There are also specific benefits of AAT practices within the classroom. Therapy dogs have been found to contribute to an elementary student's overall emotional stability; especially students who are diagnosed with a severe emotional disorder, as a therapy dog provides a unique friend to bond with in the classroom setting (Friesen, 2010). A remarkable ability that therapy dogs have in a classroom setting is motivating students to engage in reading activities.

Working with a therapy dog is a remarkably effective way to encourage students who have attention difficulties, disruptive behaviors, or a general lack of interest in reading to participate in classroom reading activities (Jalongo, 2005). Reading to a therapy dog, who is perceived by the child as a non-judgmental

audience, can inspire a child who was not previously interested in reading to participate in oral reading tasks (Friesen, 2010). In the student's perspective, a dog makes a great listener, and dogs never laugh or make fun of them for struggling or making a mistake while reading (Coulee Region Humane Society, 2012). For a child who is self-conscious about reading in front of others, reading to a therapy dog can help eliminate the fear of being laughed at or criticized by others. Taking away the negative thoughts that are associated with reading in front of others by replacing people with a therapy dog, books and attempting new words start to become something exciting to a student.

The use of therapy dogs in reading activities with students is consistent with practices in literacy instruction (Jalongo, 2005). The most comprehensive AAT reading program is Reading Education Assistance Dogs, or R.E.A.D (Coulee Region Human Society, 2012; Jalongo, 2005). R.E.A.D recommends that twenty minutes be set aside per week for students who struggle with reading to practice reading aloud to a certified therapy dog (Jalongo, 2005). Using carefully recommended books, twenty minutes a week of enjoyable and supportive reading, to a therapy dog can result in a significant increase in a student's reading ability. In a two-year longitudinal study, researchers suggest that all of the students who participated in the R.E.A.D program for thirteen months gained at least two grade levels in reading; some students improved to as much as four grade levels (Jalongo et al., 2004; Jalongo, 2005). Even if a person were to criticize the results suggesting that other potential variables could be influencing the progress in a student's reading ability; it is undisputable that the children are excited to have an opportunity to interact with

a therapy dog in the classroom setting (Jalongo et al, 2004; Jalongo, 2005; Hiemlich, 2001; Chadler et al., 2010; Chitic et al., 2012; Coulee Region Humane Society, 2012). Students who wish to attend the R.E.A.D program primarily to have an opportunity to interact with a dog still benefit greatly. The R.E.A.D program recommends twenty minutes be set aside per week to make progress in reading. Considering an average school year to be 180 days long, the amount of time equals out to approximately 14 extra hours of reading per school year. This extra time and practice is helpful to the reader, but is not too overwhelming to interfere with other school programs and outcomes. Using AAT in school can motivate students to read outside of school as well, as shown in the example below.

*“Goldie, a laid-back golden retriever, is paired with her 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading buddy. The boy (student) has attention difficulties, however, Goldie’s habit of resting her head on his knee keeps the boy calm and focused as he strokes her fur while reading a story out loud. A teacher is present but remains quiet as the student and animal interact. Later that day, after reading with Goldie, the boy checks out three items from the library about dogs” (Jalongo, 2005 pg.157).*

Animal-assisted therapy reading programs, such as R.E.A.D, are not intended to take the place of effective instructing from a schoolteacher. It simply offers an additional structured and appealing alternative instead of “go back to your seats and read to yourself” (Jalongo, 2005). Another benefit of AAT reading programs, unlike other reading interventions that may inadvertently stigmatize children who lag behind in reading, is that it attracts almost all children to reading, whether they are average, below average, or above average readers (Jalongo, 2005). Animal-assisted therapy

shows great benefits for children in not only reading, but also across curricular areas (Jalongo et al, 2004).

Elementary students genuinely want to interact and read with therapy dogs. Meeting the student demand for AAT in schools may require multiple certified therapy dogs and handlers (Jalongo, 2005). A school in Pennsylvania has taken on the high demand of AAT programs. The Capital Area Intermediate Unit, CAIU, operates an emotional support program for students in the school. CAIU has always been open to new interventions to help students, and they have supported the application of AAT and therapy dogs in an emotional support program for the past seven years (Geiest, 2011). Currently, the program has five full-time therapy dogs with over 20 trained staff members certified as therapy dog handlers (Geiest, 2011). The effectiveness of this comprehensive program continues to be researched.

### **Animal-Assisted Therapy in School Counseling**

Animal-assisted therapy is a very effective tool for school counselors at all levels for many reasons. Lange, Cox, Bernert, and Jenkins (2006) reported that the majority of counselors who practice AAT use a therapy dog to build rapport with students. In a session the counselor may have the child reflect on their relationship with the therapy dog, encouraging the student to play with the animal, and by having the student share information about the animal. Children are more sociable in the presence of an animal and are highly likely to talk to animals about serious issues, as children perceive therapy dogs to be non-judgmental participants of the counseling process (Friesen, 2010).

Animal-assisted therapy also enhances the student-counselor interaction by creating a fun and safe environment with the presence of a therapy dog (Chandler et al., 2010). Therapy dogs also have a profound calming effect on children who are under stress (Friesen, 2010). The simple act of a therapy dog bringing a toy to a student and attempting to force the toy into the hand of the stressed child often makes the student smile. The smile and behavior of the student encourages the therapy dog to continue its attempt at play, which usually results in more humorous interactions between the dog and the student. These subsequent interactions not only relieve the stress of the student, but also may also elicit laughter, an important therapeutic outcome (Geiest, 2011).

The positive interaction between the student and the dog may assist in creating a positive relationship between the student and the school counselor. The attachment behavior from the student and dog is often transferred to the school counselor, who has been doing very little, except for observing the student-dog interaction in silence (Chandler et al., 2010; Geiest, 2011). In some instances, a counselor with a therapy dog was the only counselor able to establish the relationship necessary to facilitate change in a particularly troubled student (Chandler et al., 2010). Levinson (1971) states dogs are “social lubricants”; thus, they serve as a bridge to establish effective student-counselor relationships. The example below shows how effective therapy dogs can be in alleviating the stress of an elementary student.

Some students in school become completely nonverbal when stressed.

During these times of escalated stress, the voices of teachers seem to

heighten their stress. At these times, a teacher could guide the student into the office where there is a therapy dog present. The student will usually slump into the beanbag chair where the therapy dog will visit them. The dog lays its head on the student's lap and looks up into the student's face. The dog adjusts its ear and tail to magically fit the mood of the student. At times the dog will even produce a light cry or a sigh. The counselor does not talk, but just sits there and observes. The students will make eye contact with the dog and pet them in silence. It is amazing to watch their bodies relax from their stressful states. Many of the students have written in their creative writing exercises about how the dog seems to understand how they are feeling through their non-verbal communication. (Geiest, 2011 pg. 253)

### **How To Implement an AAT Program In an Elementary School**

The first step in creating and establishing an effective animal-assisted therapy program is to develop an understanding of the training components of AAT (Jalongo, 2005). The handlers of therapy dogs are to work with their certified dogs while also providing support to the students. Therapy dogs need to be calm around adults, children, and other dogs. Therapy dogs also need to pass specific obedience training that teaches them to ignore distractions, adapt quickly to different situations, and respond reliably to commands before being certified as a therapy dog (Jalongo, 2005).

After knowing what it takes to train and receive certification, the second step in establishing an AAT program is gaining strong administrative support and educating other staff members about AAT in schools. It should be clear that the

intention is not to bring an untrained family pet along to school as a way to get the attention of students. An advocate of therapy dogs in schools should discuss with school faculty and board members that AAT is a carefully planned program that involves collaboration of reading professionals, registered and insured therapy dogs and handlers, school and local library specialists, and the community.

The next step in implementing AAT programs in elementary schools is to address the safety and liability issues of therapy dogs. The best protection against potential problems of AAT is taking the appropriate measures to ensure the safety and well being of the students. Elementary schools should work exclusively with trained, registered, and regularly evaluated handler/dog teams (Jalongo, 2005). In order to maintain certification, handlers must renew their AAT membership every two years. Certified members of AAT programs are provided with liability insurance; however this coverage only qualifies for volunteers. As a result, a teacher would not be able to bring their own therapy dog to class and have insurance coverage because they are in the role of an employee and not a volunteer. In all cases of AAT, informed consent needs to be given by both the child and their guardians prior to any interaction between the child and a therapy dog.

The final step in implementing an animal-assisted therapy program in elementary schools is considering where the school is located and the community. Not all schools are equipped to have a full time therapy dog. Even if the school would properly accommodate the needs of a therapy dog, the community may be against the idea of implementing AAT practices with their children. An advocate of AAT programs in a school that has yet to practice such techniques should expect to



take on the responsibility of informing staff, administration, parents, and community members of the purpose of AAT and the benefits of therapy dogs in elementary school settings through formal presentations, handouts, and media or online forums.

### **Pet Considerations**

It is paramount that the needs of the dog are taken into consideration when practicing animal-assisted therapy. Efforts must be made to educate all individuals working within the facility to ensure the safety of the therapy dog (Heimlich, 2001). Water and a dog kennel should be provided for the therapy dog at all times with scheduled exercise and relaxation breaks throughout the day (Heimlich, 2001; Friesen, 2010).

It is unfair and unethical to overschedule therapy animals to the point of exhaustion. It is recommended that a therapy dog work for no more than ninety minutes at a time, with a fifteen-minute break in a designated outdoor area, after each session (Heimlich, 2001; Jalongo, 2005). A therapy dog should also be closely monitored for any signs of stress. Dogs show stress by shaking, holding their ears back, holding their tail between their legs, or persistent licking; if the therapy dog exhibits any of these behaviors, the animal should be removed from the environment (Friesen, 2010).

### **Matching a Therapy Dog and a Student**

Not all dogs are appropriate candidates for therapy animals and not all students are appropriate for animal-assisted therapy. Counseling interventions should not involve a therapy animal when a situation might negatively impact the

safety or welfare of the student or the animal (Chandler et al., 2010). Children with allergies, students who are prone to seizures due to high levels of excitement, and children who exhibit aggressive behaviors towards animals should be excluded from the animal-assisted therapy process (Heimlich, 2001).

Even when a dog is a certified therapy animal, there is still an art in trying to match a therapy dog with some students. An excessively energetic dog may worsen the symptoms of a child diagnosed with ADHD; however, that same dog can act as a great behavioral stimulant to a person diagnosed with depression (Chitic et al., 2012). The size of a therapy dog may also influence an elementary student's decision to interact with the animal (Chitic et al., 2012). If a therapy animal is a large dog, an elementary student might find the dog to be scary and become distressed around the animal.

### **Local Opportunities**

The Coulee Region Humane Society, located in Onalaska, WI, developed a pet therapy program in 1985 with the core mission of "touching lives and providing love and companionship on four paws" (Coulee Region Humane Society, 2012). The Coulee Region Humane Society has developed a *Read To Rover* program that launched in 2005. The *Read To Rover* program is designed to support a positive and safe learning environment for young readers and has become a tool for many of the area schools and libraries to promote a love of books and reading (Coulee Region Humane Society, 2012). The *Read To Rover* program recently was acknowledged for its great efforts in the community by achieving affiliate status with R.E.A.D in 2010. R.E.A.D is the national leader in the field of animal-assisted reading education.

**My Personal Experience with Therapy Dogs in Schools**

For as long as I can remember, I have had a dog in my life. I grew up in a rural community with a father who has a passion for hunting. Throughout my childhood, I had the experience of working and training hounds to hunt a variety of game. This experience produced a strong connection with dogs and an opportunity to observe what remarkable companions dogs can become. I never would have thought my experiences with hunting dogs as a child would manifest into the advocacy of AAT in schools, but the first time I saw AAT in a school, I knew that instant that I wanted to learn more about pet therapy.

The first time I saw the therapy dogs in a school, I was working as a site supervisor for a school-aged child summer program. Once a week, a team of trainers from the Coulee Region Humane Society would bring two therapy dogs in to the school to interact with the children. The children, aged 5-12, engaged with the animals in small groups that incorporated our weekly theme to the activities that the children would do with the dogs. The students loved seeing and having opportunities to interact with the dogs. The therapy dogs became a common discussion among the kids, as they would often ask, "When is the next time the dogs are coming?" Seeing the interaction between therapy dogs and children immediately sparked my interest as well as my appreciating for how they could have a positive affect on students. I love dogs, I have experience training animals, and I am pursuing a career in school counseling; I could not find a reason not to raise a therapy dog of my own.

While completing my degree in counseling, I had worked with an elementary school counselor who implemented AAT in her counseling sessions and curriculum. My experience under her supervision was incredibly beneficial as I was able to observe and learn from her strategies and approach to counseling students with and without the use of her therapy dog named Odin. The days that Odin was in the school were special. The positive reactions from all students, kindergarten to 5<sup>th</sup> grade, as well as the school faculty members, only affirmed my beliefs of the influence AAT can have on the entire school environment. Everyone knew who Odin was, and so all of them also knew the school counselor; both are very recognizable figures within the school. When the students saw Odin in the halls, they would make an O.K. sign with their hands as they practiced appropriate hallway behavior while also excitingly acknowledging Odin's presence, which often brought smiles to their faces. Odin's presence gave students motivation to be engaged in classroom activities while also exhibiting appropriate classroom behavior in an attempt not to startle or displease Odin. I witnessed many other benefits Odin and my supervising counselor brought to the school environment.

I had an experience with Odin and my supervising counselor that is an excellent illustration of the positive impact a therapy dog can have in a school environment and is something that I will never forget. Odin, my supervising counselor, and myself were getting ready to go on our weekly visit with a couple of students' who are differently-abled. During these sessions with the students, Odin would wear a vest with a brush and treats placed in the zippered pockets. The students would unknowingly practice hand-eye coordination exercises with smiles

on their faces, as they would have to unzip the pockets to get treats for Odin to do tricks, to take out the brush, and then proceed to brush Odin. Fine motor exercises are often met with resistance from these children, but when they involved working with Odin, the students were very motivated to be a part of the activities. After the students were done brushing Odin and giving him his treats, the counselor, Odin and the students got ready for a walk in the hall, an exercise activity that is also perceived by the students much more positively when accompanied with Odin. While we were walking, I could not help but think that this was a great experience for not only the students with special needs, but also the counselor and myself as we were successfully accomplishing all of the goals of the session in a stimulating and exciting approach. Not long after I had those thoughts, something even more incredible happened.

As the two children we were accompanying were walking with Odin and riding in a wagon, laughing and smiling the entire time, we walked up to a situation in progress where a student with an emotional behavior disorder was having an altercation in the commons with a teacher and a teaching assistant. The student involved in the problematic situation was having a difficult time and was attempting to leave the building. The teacher and the aide were unsuccessfully trying to calm the student down and the interactions between student and staff was only making the situation more volatile.

My supervising counselor assessed what was happening and instructed me to stay with our walking students as she and Odin went towards the student in distress who was now yelling and running for different doors. The students who

were originally walking with students were informed that Odin needed to go to work and waved goodbye to the dog as they were walked back to their classroom. In this situation, the student was to a point where CPI restraints may have been necessary and were seconds away from being applied. Instead, though, when the student saw Odin, the student dropped to his knees and welcomed Odin with a hug as the therapy dog nuzzled his head into the child's shoulder and sat down calmly as the child began to pet the dog with tears running down his face. A situation, which escalated to the point of potentially using CPI restraints, had become completely diffused when the child saw Odin. The child with Odin by his side was now willing to walk to the principal's office and discuss the situation. I do not know what would have occurred if Odin was not there at that moment, but I do know it would have not ended as ideal as it did that day.

As my interest in animal assisted therapy grew, I had become more and more excited to purchase my first puppy and begin our own adventure in becoming a positive impact in children's lives as a therapy dog team. I purchased a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever after considering many breeds of dogs. I named my puppy Lambeau or Beau and brought him home when he was 8 weeks old. Lambeau as a puppy is best described as a little fur-ball who loved to chew on anything that was in front of him. Training started immediately, as I had applied operant conditioning techniques to teach Lambeau his name and basic commands such as "sit", "down", and "stay". Treats were and continue to be a strong motivator for Lambeau in learning new objectives and completing various commands. Lambeau began to pick

up on commands, and with the repetition of practicing the tasks, he soon began to consistently behave as a well-trained puppy.

Lambeau was exposed to many experiences and situations as a puppy to give him early exposure to children, large groups of people, and various settings. When Lambeau was only 10 weeks old, he was utilized as a group member in the school-aged program where I work. The children's faces lit up whenever Lambeau was present. The students would participate in story time with Lambeau, as they would read pages of books to Beau. About once a week, Beau would visit the children, as we would incorporate the week's theme into an animal-assisted education lesson. This experience was very rewarding for me as a staff member and advocate of AAT as I saw the excitement in the student's faces when they were interacting with my puppy. At our program we have students draw or write about their experiences depending on their age and developmental level. Pictures and stories of Lambeau began to fill the children's journals. A unique experience for these children was that they were able to see Lambeau mature physically and behaviorally over the summer. Being able to watch Beau transform from a little puppy to a mature dog gave them a model to show how change and learning can occur.

Lambeau participated in the school-aged program throughout the summer and was also a part of a small group therapy class called Pals of Paws. Pals of Paws is a short-term counseling group that promotes animal advocacy and training while helping children develop positive peer relationships, communication skills, behavior management, leadership, and other developmentally appropriate skills. Pals of Paws started when Lambeau was still a puppy and was found to be quite effective. Pals of

Paws is about to start its 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle as a counseling group and Lambeau continues to elicit children's laughs as a maturing dog. He is currently a 10-month-old dog who recently passed his Canine Good Citizen Certification, awarding him with the credentials to be a certified therapy dog. Following in the footsteps of my supervising counselor with Odin, I had enrolled Lambeau into a couple behavioral training courses at the local Humane Society.

Before enrolling in the Canine Good Citizen class, I had Lambeau complete an intermediate behavioral training course to familiarize Beau and myself with the training class's process and expectations. The Canine Good Citizen class lasted 8 weeks, and covered everything from reliably coming when called, sitting, staying, accepting strangers, disregarding distractions, exposure to various medical equipment, walking through a crowd, walking with a loose lead, and having the dog remain calm when separated from its owner. The final week of class included an assessment to test the dog in each domain. If any of the categories were failed, the dog would not pass the exam and would have to retake the training course before testing for the Canine Good Citizen again. It was very rewarding to see all of our hard work pay off when Lambeau and I passed our exam and received therapy dog certification. It took a lot of practice and a lot of perseverance, but we are now able to have a positive impact in other's lives as a professional counselor and a certified therapy dog.



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