
Virtual OTD Capstone Symposium, Spring 2020

Spring 4-23-2020

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Recommended Citation

Tatla, Jyoti K.; Cohill, Becki; and MacDermott, Susan, "Occupational Therapy's Role in Matching Handlers and Assistance Dogs" (2020). *Virtual OTD Capstone Symposium, Spring 2020*. 19.
<https://soar.usa.edu/otdcapstonespring2020/19>

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Occupational Therapy's Role in Matching Handlers and Assistance Dogs

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Background

There are three types of assistance dogs: service dogs, guide dogs, and hearing dogs (Assistance Dogs International, Inc., 2019). Assistance dogs offer a variety of benefits for individuals with different needs. Occupational therapists are often seen using dogs as a modality during sessions, but not involved during the evaluation or matching process between handlers and assistance dogs. There is a lack of research that explores the role of occupational therapy within dog training facilities (Fairman & Huebner, 2001). This project will be using the framework of Ecology of Human Performance (EHP) to explore the relationship between a person and his or her environment and human performance (Dunn, Brown, & McGuigan, 1994).

Problem

Handlers are not able to get successfully matched with an assistance dog the first time and may end up going through the matching process numerous times (Lloyd et al., 2016).

Purpose

The purposes of this project was to assess and observe the matching process and to identify the role of an occupational therapist in aiding the evaluation process with potential handlers and assistance dogs.

Acknowledgement: Special thanks to Martha Gibson, Kristin Lucas, Kimberly Mizia, and Carol Roquemore

Results

Interviews Themes

Routines	Changes in Tasks	Physical Environment
<p>Before: "I will have to wake up earlier before school for relieving and walking the dog"</p> <p>During: Use a power chair rather than a manual chair to reduce shoulder fatigue, ask their significant other for more assistance, hire paid help, and finalize plans for adoption of their first dog.</p>	<p>During: "My family will help with picking up poop, and my sister is a dog groomer, so she'll help with grooming. The kids will eventually learn more responsibilities as we go."</p> <p>After: One individual expressed that her significant other felt jealous and sad that they were no longer part of their routine in activities such as getting articles of clothing or going on walks (P6 CCI).</p>	<p>During: Handlers with successor dogs were better prepared the second time around compared to first time users, specifically wheelchair users who had adapted their homes long time ago.</p> <p>During: "There's a lot I didn't realize, I'll get an actual kennel, make it feel more like home.... get basic necessities like food bins because I don't have that...if I move now, I have different considerations like a closed area for my dog to run in, since I live in a small apartment."</p>

Matching Process Factors

Guide Dogs for the Blind	Canine Companions for Independence	Canine Support Teams
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pace Orientation & Mobility Control Factor Paired with dogs the first day of training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Onsite interview to view handling skills Handler's and dog's personality 5 rounds of practice with two potential dogs Paired with dogs the third day of training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handlers' and dogs' personalities Paired with dogs the first day of training

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Methods

Observed and conducted a needs assessment at three different dog training facilities within California: Guide Dogs for the Blind (GDB), Canine Companions for Independence (CCI), and Canine Support Teams (CST). Participants were recruited for interviews through site supervisors, two-week observations, mentor, and peer. Interviews took place at CCI and over the phone, lasting 20 to 45 minutes.

25 Participants

11 CCI, 10 GB, 4 CST participants

Interview Topics Covered

- Participants life (routines and task changes)
- Need for assistance dog
- Task the assistance dog will aid in
- Additional support/adaptive equipment
- Home environment



Image retrieved from CCI.org

Conclusion

Several key findings from this project revealed a need for occupational therapy within the evaluation process and two-week team training. Therapists could aid with adapting learning material, addressing performance patterns, conducting home evaluations, and educating staff about a range of clients who have different disabilities.