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Parent Perceptions of Service Animals Impacts on the Language Skills of Their Children with Autism

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Parent Perceptions of Service Animals Impacts on the Language Skills of Their Children with Autism

McManamon, R., Brackenbury, T., Wilson, M.

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a pervasive developmental disorder that impairs the ability of the individual to communicate, form relationships, and restricts their behaviors (Sierwertsen et al., 2015). While there is much about ASD that remains unknown, there is a wealth of research in the discipline of Communication Sciences and Disorders, particularly in the linguistic area of pragmatics, or social interaction. Characteristics of ASD pertaining to pragmatics can vary significantly from person to person. Individuals with ASD often struggle with relating to the emotions of others, choosing appropriate topics for conversation, initiating interactions, and feeling comfortable with others. (Harwood et al., 2018).

Utilizing animals for therapeutic purposes is not an unheard-of occurrence. While often used to help treat physical or mental health conditions, there has been a recent rise in animal assisted therapy for individuals with developmental disabilities. The role of the animal can be to provide comfort to the individual, alert the individual to any safety concerns, or assist in activities (Johnson, 2020). For conditions such as ASD, the therapy animals mainly serve to facilitate interactions, as well as comfort the individual and reduce negative emotions and behaviors associated with ASD. Based on our review of the current literature, there are many intervention approaches that have been shown to successfully improve the pragmatic skills of children with autism. (Berry et al., 2013; Carvalho, A., 2019; Harwood et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Sierwertsen et al., 2015). Within this literature are several studies that have shown the presence of widespread benefits to children with ASD with a therapy dog present in therapy

sessions, or even in the home as an emotional companion. These benefits include reduction in stress/anxiety levels and problematic behaviors; and an increase in verbal and nonverbal social behaviors, eye contact, happiness/comfort levels, and meaningful use of language (Berry et al., 2013; Carvalho, A., 2019; Harwood et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Sierwertsen et al., 2015).

There are a few common themes of improvements within the area of social language and behavior for children with service dogs. In some of the studies, the presence of a service dog resulted in an increased frequency and duration of both verbal and nonverbal behaviors during social interactions with peers (Harwood et al., 2018). Specifically, dogs act as a social bridge to facilitate easier interactions between peers (Hill et al., 2018). Therapy dogs also work to increase overall sense of responsibility within the individual.

Specifically, Harwood et al., 2018, describes the effects that childhood autism has on their ability to form relationships and how canine companions can help this ability. This study interviews 11 mothers of children with autism about how they perceive the use of the service dogs on the emotional, social, and behavioral aspects of their children. Harwood et al. describes an added sense of safety and security in the child that helps them decrease stress and anxiety in social situations, and how the dogs can help form a bridge between their peers to facilitate relationship formations. There was a common emergence of love and companionship, as well as perceptions of ownership with the child. The dog had a comforting and calming influence, assisting in the child's understanding of world and navigate challenging experiences (Harwood et al., 2018). It was also found that having a therapy dog leads children to exhibit more verbal and nonverbal behaviors during social interactions and reduces the frequency of problematic behaviors (Harwood et al., 2018).

The present research intends to add to these findings of overall general areas of benefits by looking specifically at the area of pragmatics and relationship forming in more depth. This would include the potential increases in social skills and overall comfort levels of the child, as well as decreases in the negative behaviors, such as withdrawal and lack of eye contact, that are typically associated with the occurrence of ASD.

Methods

The method used as approved by BGSU's Institutional Review Board on 06/30/20. The stamped consent form is included in Appendix A. At the start of the research process, we recruited our subject by reaching out to associations that provide therapy dogs to children with ASD, as well as associations that serve families of children with ASD. While we struggled to hear back from places wanting to work with us, we reached out to some Facebook groups for parents of children with ASD. Our participant expressed interest in the content of the study and reached out to the principal investigator and set up a time and date for an interview.

We interviewed the parent of one child with ASD that currently has a service dog. After obtaining consent from the parent, a 30-minute semi-structured interview was held over a web meeting platform (Zoom) due to the current limitations in the ability to meet face to face with the individuals. During the interview, we asked a baseline set of questions and added follow-up questions regarding their child's autism and therapy dog, their child's communication skills before and after the introduction of the dog, and the potential effects that communication changes have had on the child's behavior and emotional states. The interview was recorded and transcribed by the principal investigator. Using qualitative analysis methods, Dr. Brackenbury, Mrs. Wilson, and I coded the transcripts for individual ideas and organized the codes into overall themes. The parent will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card for their participation.

Results

From the interview, we identified four common underlying themes regarding the child's experience with their therapy dog. These themes include responsibility, confidence, fitting in with peers, and spontaneous language use.

Responsibility

From the interview, our participant discussed various ways that the therapy dog has improved the overall responsibility of the child. It is brought up that there are not very many household chores that the child is able to accomplish on their own due to their symptoms of ASD. The dog, however, incites personal responsibility in being the main care provider for their dog. The child is then able to have daily responsibilities that they are able to accomplish on their own or with little guidance. This influence of responsibility is apparent on the dog as well as the child. The dog has the responsibility to detect changes in the child's behavior and mood and proactively take the measure to calm the child down before those negative behaviors can emerge. This double-sided sense of responsibility in the child-dog relationship helps foster a sense of duty and responsibility in the child to take care of the dog, as well as the dog to look out for and support the child in the areas that they struggle with and provide a safe environment for the child to learn.

From a parent's perspective, the presence of a therapy dog is also beneficial in that the dog is able to reduce some of the workload and stress on the parent in taking care of the child. Being trained for the purpose of supporting a person with ASD, therapy dogs are useful for handling behaviors and situations that the parents might struggle to know how to help with.

Confidence

Another big impact from having a therapy dog is the confidence that the child exhibits in a variety of settings and situations. Stemming from the increased responsibility, the child is able to have something that they can be proud of and feel good about. Their dog becomes a sense of pride for them and can quickly grab the attention of peers and other members of society. Since the dog is trained to be patient and follow the commands of the child, the child is then much more likely to succeed in the activities that they partake in with their dog and feel accomplished when they otherwise might not have a whole lot, they are able to do on their own.

Our participant had multiple stories in which their child could talk about their dog in a way that shows more competency than there may have been before, that the child internalizes and speaks proudly of.

Fitting in with Peers

An important function of a therapy dog on individuals with ASD is to act as a social bridge to facilitate social interactions. Our participant also noticed many changes in their child's ability to communicate with and fit in with their peers when the dog is present.

First, the dog becomes a topic of conversation that the child has knowledge on and is able to contribute to conversations regarding the dog by having relevant stories and experiences to share. The dog is sort of a kickstand on which the child is able to support themselves on by always having a topic of conversation that they are knowledgeable in and able to discuss with peers.

Second, having a dog nearby is a good tool to initiate conversations with peers. People are drawn to seeing a dog in public and are more inclined to approach the child and start speaking with them. This is a good tool for the child to have so they are able to use their dog as a way to communicate with others.

Last, because the therapy dog is useful for starting communications between the child and others, the child experiences more exposure to different things. Particularly, the participant discussed how their child is better able to recognize emotions from the kinds of interactions they have with other because of the dog.

Spontaneous Language Use

Our final theme found from our interview is that the dog encourages more language use from the child. When engaging in conversations about their dog, the child has more that they are readily able to talk about, and so the child participated in more spontaneous conversations by sharing their sense of responsibility and confidence of the caretaking of their dog.

Our participant has their child engage in activities/therapies that requires the child to communicate with the dog. From doing this, the child has learned that the dog requires language to be used in order to receive commands from the child and can no longer rely on other strategies as dogs don't understand nonverbal communication attempts. With a child that primarily communicates through behaviors rather than verbal language, having a dog that they are responsible for that can only respond to verbalizations, is a very effective way to prompt the child into using more language to communicate with others.

Discussion

From this interview, we can see multiple areas within the broad field of pragmatics in which a therapy dog can benefit the child that they are partnered with. In general, it appears that having a trained service dog for individuals with ASD may be a good tool to support the developmental of a variety of skills.

Specifically, within the areas of socializing and use of language, the dog can provide the child with opportunities for conversations, as well as topics to discuss and experiences to share.

In this study, we found results that closely match the conclusions found relevant literature. This particular area of study identifies an overall lack of in-depth research that will require larger and more controlled studies that reduce the presence of bias to take place in the future to confirm the significance of the results suggested in the literature.

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Appendix A

Children with Autism and Their Service Dogs

a research study

Service dogs may help children with autism develop better communication skills.

A key element to forming relationships is the ability to communicate our wants, needs, and feelings with other people. Children on the autism spectrum often have problems with forming relationships and communicating with other people. This can be harmful to their development and potentially worsen the severity of their other symptoms.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the communication skills of children on the autism spectrum are affected by the presence of a trained service dog.



We would like to invite you to take part in this study.

Who can participate?

Parents of a child with autism who has a service or support dog.

- child between 4 and 12 years of age
- dog in the home for 6 months or longer

What are the costs and benefits?

There are no costs or risks greater than those in everyday life.

Your participation will help us better understand the impacts that service dogs may have on children's communication skills.

Your participation is voluntary. Choosing to not participate will have no negative consequences with the referring agency or Bowling Green State University.

You will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card.

What happens in the study?

We will meet with you for an interview to talk about your child and their service dog.

The interview will take place through a video conferencing platform (e.g., Zoom or Webex).

The interview will last for approximately 45 minutes.

The interview will be recorded and transcribed. You will have the opportunity to read and revise the transcript.

You may withdraw from the study at any time, including during or after the interview.

All of the information we collect will remain confidential.

How will your information be protected?

A codename (e.g., DG107) will be used to reference your interview and transcript.

No personal information will be shared with anyone who is not directly involved in the study. This includes any public presentations of the results.

All data will be stored in files or on a secure computer in Dr. Brackenbury's locked research lab. Only members of the research team will have access to the study's data.



If you ever have any questions, comments,
or concerns about this study, please contact

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If you would like to sign up for this study:

1. Email or call Rachel McManamon
mcmanre@bgsu.edu (614) 634-8292
2. She will schedule a day and time for the interview.
3. You will receive an invitation via email or text for access to the video conference.
4. Ms. McManamon and Dr. Brackenbury will participate in the interview.



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EFFECTIVE __06/30/2020_
EXPIRES __06/09/2021_

Children with Autism and Their Service Dogs

a research study

Parent/Guardian Verbal Consent Questions

We will ask you the following questions at the start of the interview. These will help us to answer any questions that you have and verify your consent to participate.

1. Have you read the entire document that explains the research study, including information about what is expected of you?
2. Have you been informed of your rights as a participant?
3. Have you been told about any risks and inconveniences that you might experience by participating in this study?
4. Have you been notified of the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty?
5. Have all of your questions been answered at this time?
6. Do you give your consent to participate in this study?



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EXPIRES __06/09/2021__

Questions to be Asked During the Interview

Demographic questions

1. What is your child's name and birth date?
2. What is your child's current grade in school?
3. What is your child's gender?
4. What is your child's ethnicity and racial heritage?
5. At what age was your child diagnosed with autism?
6. Is your child's dog a trained service dog or an untrained companion?
7. How long have you had the dog?

Primary interview questions

1. What were your child's communication skills before you received the dog?
2. How does your child currently communicate?
3. Do you think any of the changes in your child's communication are the result of having the dog? If so, which ones?
4. Has the dog had any other effects on your child, such as behaviors, confidence, or mood?
5. Is the dog involved in any therapies that your child receives (e.g., speech and language, physical therapy, or occupational therapy)?

Appendix B

Presentation of finding:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lnhaHBGgyxRZmYHwdZkt5YZUiMNIX30r/view?usp=sharing>