

An Overview of the Effectiveness of Animal-Assisted Therapy with Children who have Experienced

Sexual Abuse

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Child Sexual Abuse

Operational Definition (Miller-Perrin, Perrin, & Renzetti, 2021; RAINN, 2021)
➤ **Child Sexual Abuse is any completed or attempted sexual act, sexual contact with, or exploitation of of a child**
➤ **Examples: anal/oral/vaginal penetration, touching of the genitals, sex trafficking, fondling, masturbation in the presence of a minor, exposing a child to pornography**

Prevalence
➤ **In 2017, 3.5 million children were reported to Child Protective Services (CPS).**
➤ **8.6% of those children reported being sexually abused.**
➤ **Difficult to provide accurate prevalence rates as child maltreatment and abuse is underreported.**

Consequences of Child Sexual Abuse
➤ **There are several consequences that can arise from sexual abuse. Children are at a higher risk for emotional and behavioral difficulties, cognitive distortions, and interpersonal problems.**
➤ **This population is also at a higher risk for developing several psychiatric disorders, such as PTSD, eating disorders, Borderline Personality Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, and Substance Use Disorders.**

Intervention for CSA
➤ **Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavior Therapy (TF-CBT)**
➤ **TF-CBT is a trauma-focused intervention that involves psychoeducation, skill development, processing the trauma, and involving the parents in the session. This intervention can help both the child and parent/s overcome the consequences that developed out of the trauma.**

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Animal-Assisted Therapy

Human-Animal Relationship (Fine, 2010)
➤ **Humans tend to view their animals in a humanistic way. It has also been shown that touching an animal has a biological effects on humans that can produce a calming feeling by reducing heart rate and increasing production beta endorphins and dopamine. Animals have also been shown to decrease loneliness as the animal can provide a sense of support and companionship.**

Theoretical Background
➤ **Attachment Theory**
○ **The theory states that humans are healthy and functioning when they have attachments to others.**
○ **The theory supports that animals can be strong attachments for humans and promote healthy functioning.**

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT)
➤ **Definition: A goal-directed interventions in which the animal has a therapeutic purpose in the treatment process that has specific objectives.**
➤ **Must be directed or delivered by a specialized professional**

Effects of AAT
➤ **AAT can produce a calming effect in clients, decrease heart rate and blood pressure, decrease feelings of depression and anxiety, act a catalyst for conversation, and provide clients with a non-judgmental and unconditional approach.**

Equine-Assisted Therapy (Signal, Taylor, Botros, Prentice, & Lazarus, 2013; Kemp, Signal, Botros, Taylor, & Prentice, 2014).
➤ **Equine-Assisted Therapy is incorporating a therapy horse into the intervention. There has been research to support that using a horse can produce similar results in therapy as using a therapy dog. Equine-Assisted Therapy can be used in different client populations to promote physical and emotional change in treatment. For example, horses can promote positive psychosocial behaviors, increase problem-solving skills, and increase feelings of empowerment.**

Examples of Goals and Objective in AAT (Parish-Plass, 2008)
➤ **Aiding in developing a therapeutic alliance/ gaining trust**
➤ **Establishing normalcy and safety**
➤ **Self-esteem**
➤ **Empathy**
➤ **Physiological sensation**
➤ **Facilitate change in cognitive representations**
➤ **Aid in processing**

Treatment Outcomes

Canine-Assisted Therapy
➤ **Using Canine-Assisted Therapy, in cases of child sexual abuse, as an adjunct for TF-CBT produced higher acceptability rates in caregivers (Dravnsnik, Signal, & Canoy, 2018).**
➤ **Significant reduction in all symptoms of PTSD reported by children**
➤ **Caregivers reported positive changes in behaviors and mood at home (Signal, Taylor, Prentice, McDade, & Burke, 2017).**

Forensic Interviews
➤ **Having a canine present and being able to pet the canine during a forensic interview reduced heat rate, decreased levels of salivary alpha-amylase, and increased levels of salivary immunoglobulin A (Krause-Parello & Friedmann, 2014).**
➤ **Having a therapy dog present can act a buffer for children and reduce feelings of discomfort (Krause-Parello & Gulick, 2015).**

Equine-Assisted Therapy
➤ **Using it as an adjunct to a Child Abuse Intervention Program (Kemp, Signal, Botros, Taylor, & Prentice, 2014)**
○ **All children had a significant decrease in anxiety, depression, and other trauma-related symptoms.**
➤ **Children who experienced sexual abuse reported a significant decrease in depressive symptoms (Signal, Taylor, Botros, Prentice, & Lazarus, 2013).**

Considerations

Limitations
➤ **There is not enough research to support AAT and the use of AAT in child sexual abuse cases.**
➤ **Research has shown that AAT, both canine and equine, to be effective in reducing a range of symptoms and promoting positive change in children’s lives.**

Animal Welfare (Fine, 2010)
➤ **Stress on the animal**
○ **Sweaty paws, increase in salivation, panting, muscle tension, shaking, restlessness, yawning, aggression, hypervigilance**