Can therapy dogs increase social interaction in children with autism?

This CAT evaluates if the use of therapy dogs in occupational therapy can be an effective intervention to increase behaviors associated with social interaction and social skills in children with autism.

1 Ask: Research Question
   In children with autism, what is the effect of using dogs in OT on addressing social interaction as compared to OT without the use of dogs?

2a Acquire: Search Terms
   Patient/client group: Children, autistic disorder
   Intervention: animal assisted therapy, bonding, animal pet therapy, human-pet, dogs
   Comparison: 
   Outcome(s): social skills

2b Acquire: Selected Articles
   Martin & Farnum (2002): A repeated measures study design that explored the effects of using a dog in therapy sessions, compared to a toy dog or ball, on the frequency and duration of target behaviors and verbalizations for 10 children diagnosed with PDD.
   Redefor & Goodman (1989): A cohort study design that measured the effects of therapy dogs on behavior patterns associated with interaction and those associated with isolation in 12 children diagnosed with autism.
   Sams et al. (2006): A within subject repeated measures study that explored the effect of a therapy animal compared to standard OT intervention on language and behaviors in 22 children diagnosed with autism.
   Viau et al. (2010): A within subject repeated measures study that explored the effects of therapy dogs on the cortisol levels and behavior patterns of 57 children with diagnoses of autism, asperger’s or PDD.

3a Appraise: Study Quality
   Martin & Farnum (2002): Suggestive. Convenience sample. Background information was limited and the therapists, participants and coders were not blinded.
   Sams et al. (2006): Suggestive. Larger sample. Number of treatment sessions varied and the occupational therapists were not blind.
   Viau et al. (2010): Suggestive. Analysis of the data was precise and thorough, but none of the participants were blind and there was no long-term follow up.

3b Appraise: Study Results
   Three of the studies provided evidence that the use of dogs in therapy can lead to an increase in behaviors associated with social interaction and a decrease in behaviors associated with isolation or labeled as problematic. However, the studies failed to provide information on recommended frequency and duration for the use of assisted animal therapy. Further research is needed to provide conclusive evidence and demonstrate how to make this a more viable option for families and therapists.

4 Apply: Conclusions for Practice
   The studies did show some benefits from the use of dogs in therapy and no adverse effects, thus the use of a therapy dog may prove beneficial for Jimmy. Therapy dogs may be beneficial in practice, however, before proceeding the OT should examine environmental factors, client and family values and resources. When a family and client does not have their own pet, benefits can still be gained in the clinic from interactions with a therapy dog.

References

Reviewers:
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? Unclear: Further research is needed to determine if therapy dogs are effective for increasing social skills in children with autism.