
ASD RESEARCH

P5 – ANIMAL-ASSISTED SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

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Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) have difficulty tolerating and understanding social interactions. Given recent research showing the effectiveness of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) for children with ASD, we proposed that an intervention with dogs would be an effective way to teach critical social skills. The specific objectives of this study were to increase children's ability to communicate effectively by developing their skills in reading the non-verbal cues of others. It was hypothesized that incorporating a dog into the intervention would produce a greater effect on social skills, theory of mind, and feelings of isolation than would be obtained from conventional social skills training. We compared AAT social skills groups to traditional social skills groups without an animal present over 12 weeks. Participants (ages 8–14) were students at a therapeutic treatment center diagnosed with high-functioning ASD. The Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS-2), Children's Depression Inventory (CDI-2), Social Language Development Test (SLDT), and the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Task (RMET) were used to measure social skills and emotional functioning. As predicted, participants in the animal-assisted social skills group rated as less symptomatic on the Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS-2), the primary outcome measure of autism related symptoms, than participants in the traditional social skills group. Both groups showed improvements in theory of mind (RMET) as well as decreased feelings of isolation and depressive symptoms (CDI-2). Given the current findings, social skills groups with dogs may be an effective way to reduce symptoms of ASD when compared to traditional training models.
