

Winter, 2017 PILOT STUDY



AAI & Wellness Project

Carleton University Resident Therapy Dog Program

Shannon Noonan, Project Coordinator

Background & Purpose

Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) “provide opportunities for motivational, educational, recreational, and/or therapeutic benefits to enhance the quality of life [of humans]. AAAs are delivered in a variety of environments by specially-trained professionals, paraprofessionals, and/or volunteers in association with animals that meet specific criteria. Key features include absence of specific treatment goals; volunteers and treatment providers are not required to take detailed notes; visit content is spontaneous” (Delta Society, n.d., as cited in Kruger & Serpell, 2006, p. 23)

A 2014 review of studies identified an increasing empirical base

for AAAs, and the need for further research (Borrego et al, 2014).

This fact sheet shares the history and findings of a Resident Therapy Dog Program for students on Carleton University campus.

The program was set up at Carleton University to provide an opportunity for student residents to de-stress with the help of a St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog named Blue and his handler Shannon Noonan, a St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog volunteer and Carleton University staff member.

As part of a multi-site project, the aim of this pilot study is to

identify the outcomes/effects of the AAA Program during the Therapy Dog team visits.

The concepts of love and support are prominent in the literature as well as practice and so are examined here for if and how students experience them, and key outcomes from past studies are measured (e.g., stress, anxiety, happiness, participation). Feedback is collected from students.



Canine Assisted Activity Program

Shannon Noonan initiated the Therapy Dog Program at Carleton University with her canine Great Dane-Pointer mix, named Blue. In 2015, when looking to adopt a dog, Shannon was seeking one that would be suitable as a Therapy Dog because she intended to get involved in the Ottawa community on a volunteer basis. After passing the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog assessment in January 2016, Shannon’s supervisors at the university were supportive of the idea of bringing Blue to

campus as a holistic method to connect with students and fill the animal-human connection for students living on campus and away from their pets. A pilot program was initiated in the Carleton University Residence.

Blue had a private space within a counselling office, outfitted with comfortable furniture and pillows, pictures of dogs, and accessories like candy, Kleenex, lint brushes and hand sanitizer. He and Shannon held office hours on a twice-weekly basis

and students were also able to drop in during study period.

The ‘pawsitive’ effects of Blue’s presence were immediately witnessed, including anxiety reduction, calming effects, and many repeat visitors. The program also appeared to reduce stigma in the counselling office where it was housed; Blue attracted students into the space by promoting a positive atmosphere of wellness rather than solely a place to ‘get help’.

Volunteer Handler	Dog Name	Dog Breed	Dog Age	Dog Years Worked	Therapy Dog Organization
Shannon Noonan	Blue	Great Dane-Pointer mix	5	2 years	St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program

Research Methods

This pilot evaluation was designed on a limited scale to gain preliminary insight into the outcomes of the Carleton University Resident Therapy Dog Program and develop a future robust study.

The data collection was via a questionnaire. Qualitative, open-ended inquiry documented participants' subjective experiences, meanings and processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Quantitative, Likert scales documented outcomes in literature identified areas.

The data was collected on a voluntary basis from January to April 2017. A total of 53 student (44 female, 9 male) questionnaires were completed. This accounts for approximately 25% sampling of students who attended the program. One Therapy Dog was involved in the data collection: Blue.

Meetings with Blue were on a 'first come, first served' basis to a maximum of 4 individuals visiting at a time. Visits were timed if demand was large in order to accommodate all students. On average, a student visited with Blue for 15 minutes, ranging from 5 to 30.

The students were presented with an English worded questionnaire at the completion of each visit and filled it in on-site and out of the presence of the Therapy Dog team. The questionnaire was in a paper format.



The student demographics are:

	Total	Female	Male
Number	53	44	9
Percentage	100%	83%	17%
Has a pet(s) at home	62%	61%	66%
Has a dog(s)	60%	59%	66%
Has pets living with them	4%	2%	11%

Data Analysis

The data collected using the Likert scales were analyzed quantitatively for descriptive statistics (i.e., mean and frequencies). Means and frequencies were compared to provide an indication of highest means and largest proportion of agreement on items. T-test mean comparisons were conducted on how a client felt before and after spending time with the therapy dog.

The qualitative data was analyzed through an inductive thematic analysis. Such an analysis seeks to identify recurrent patterns, or themes, in textual data. These themes were compared with others and clustered based on similarity in meaning (Saldana, 2010). The frequencies presented here may not sum to the sample size because sentences can be thematically coded more than once. All data was reviewed and interpreted by our multi-disciplinary team.



Ethics & Partnerships

Ethics exemption was granted from Carleton University and the University of Saskatchewan Human Research Ethics Board given the project's evaluative focus, and an ethics certificate was granted from the U of S Animal Research Ethics Board and adhered to the Canadian Council on Animal Care guidelines for humane animal use.

Blue and Shannon are St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program volunteers,

and Blue has also passed the Canadian Kennel Club Canine Good Neighbour Program. The program adhered to Carleton University's risk management policies and procedures, and given that Shannon is a Carleton University employee, the Therapy Dog team is covered under Carleton insurance (including the dog). This is unique to Carleton University. The University views the program as supporting its holistic approach to student mental health and its Student Mental Health Framework.

Key Carleton University Department supporters of the Resident Therapy Dog Program include:

Housing & Residence Life; Centre for Initiatives in Education; Office of the Vice-President, Students & Enrolment; University Services; Healthy Workplace; Health Promotion—Health & Counselling; Media Production Centre; Student Experience Office; The Charlatan; the Carleton Student Mental Health Engagement Committee and countless others.

Becoming a St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog

The St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program started in Peterborough, Ontario in 1992. Today, over 3,300 therapy dog programs can be found across Canada and whose visits research thousands of Canadians each year. The handler must be 18 years of age or older; physically and mentally capable of performing the activities that are reasonable for the type of service they are providing; willing to complete an application pro-

cess and Criminal Record Check; able to successfully participate in a dog evaluation; and able to provide up-to-date veterinarian documents indicating that all vaccinations are current.

The dog must be accepting of a friendly stranger; sit calm for petting; walk on a loose leash; walk through a crowd; sit on command/stay in place; and react well to another dog or to distractions (St. John Ambulance, 2015).

A team commits to volunteering at least once a month and annually provides a veterinary record of vaccinations and any behaviour-related issues with the dog. The handlers sign an annual attestation form to verify their Criminal Record Check and provide an updated Check every three years. Visit www.sja.ca for more information.

Discussion

Overall, the vast majority of students attending the Carleton University Resident Therapy Dog Program very much enjoyed the time they spent with the Therapy Dog team, and specifically Blue the dog, and felt better because of it.

The outcomes/effects of the Carleton University Resident Therapy Dog Program are discussed within the pre-determined categories of love and support. Support for both objectives was identified, as follows:

If and how students experienced love and support from the Therapy Dog & support from the handler.

LOVE

Overall, the students shared that they felt loved by the dog. Many expressed their love of animals generally, including for some their own pets.

"I love dogs."

"A stressful week and dogs always help calm me down and be happy."

"Blue reminds me of my dog, Leo, and I miss him like crazy."

"Everybody loves dogs."

"If they like dogs, it is a great way to relax with man's best friend."

The literature identifies dogs' innate ability to offer and receive nurturance (Chandler, 2005; Levinson, 1984; Melson & Fine, 2010). Therapy Dogs present with non-judgmental warmth, companionship and bonding, which in turn nurtures the ability of humans to love and trust (Arkow, 2011). In fact, it has been reported that interacting with dogs can, for some, parallel the social support experienced in human-human relationships (Fine & Beck, 2010). Animals can trigger happy memories, im-

prove mood, and bring a sense of happiness, joy and a general sense of wellbeing to individuals (Arkow, 2011). Perceived shifts in participants' feelings and mood may also be influenced by beneficial hormones and neurochemicals that are released when petting an animal, including oxytocin, prolactin, dopamine, beta endorphins and phenylethylamine (Odendaal & Lehmann, 2000).

SUPPORT

The students shared that they felt supported by the Therapy Dog, and as well felt support from the handler. Many identified this as de-stressing and a good coping mechanism.

"I have social anxiety disorder and it is a good way for me to interact with the dog, and other people with a common interest."

"I feel calmer and less stressed. It makes me happy and I miss my dogs less."

"Makes me feel happier and less stressed."

"It is a good, effective way to de-stress."

"Blue is very easy going and helps my stress levels."

"Nice to chat with dog handler, as well get to take mind off school and see Blue."

The literature shares that an animal can instill relief from stress (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002). Arkow (2011) refers to Therapy Dogs as "a form of stress-reducing or stress-buffering social support" (p.2). Kruger and Serpell (2010) suggest that they can be calming and reduce anxiety, and serve as a buffer from anxiety-generating stimuli. Physiological changes in humans can also occur, including lowered blood pressure, heart rate, levels of cholesterol and triglycerides, and increased dopamine production which reduces the stress hormone cortisol (as cited in, Arkow, 2011; Wilson, 1987).

The handler's offering of support alongside the therapy animals has only recently been acknowledged in the literature (Adams, et al., 2015). There is, for example, evidence that the presence of a dog in a counselling session can facilitate a client's communication and feel-

ings of comfort. Wesley, Minatrea and Watson (2009), for example, found in their study of an adult residential substance abuse program that clients were more likely to open up in the presence of a dog about their histories of violence and trauma. We have seen glimpses of this as well in the work of Hodgson and Darling (2011) on the physician pet query, in which a primary care provider can more fully determine their patients' environmental history and social context by asking about pets.

OTHER THERAPEUTIC BENEFITS

The students overwhelmingly shared that the dogs made them feel happy.

"Dogs are therapeutic and calming. They bring lots of happiness."

"Blue just makes you feel happy and relaxed."

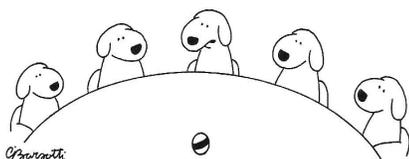
"I feel happy after spending time with Blue."

"Good for making you calm and relaxed, and in control of your emotions. I personally feel more happy and not as 'numb' or stressed afterwards. I feel others would feel the same."

The literature shares dogs live in the present moment and this can be helpful for humans to be present (B. Doan, personal communication, November 14, 2014). Individuals can gain a sense of comfort from being with a dog in the here and now. Harris (as cited in Johnson, 2011) shares, for example, that "by expressing their pure joy at seeing us, our pets teach us that living in the moment is not only a healthy thing to do, but also helps us to feel happier" (p. 33).

Male versus Female

There were many similarities between male and female students, particularly on their agreement with their feeling of comfort/love and support from the dog. Some slight differences were noted in that on average, females were slightly stronger in agreement that the Therapy Dog helped them de-stress. Additionally, females had stronger agreement of feeling calm and feeling in control of their emotions after spending time with the Therapy Dog team.



"Perhaps we're overthinking the situation."

Student Mental Health

Student mental health is a growing concern on university campuses and animal assisted interventions have become part of the response. The practice of offering AAls, and specifically AAAs, on university campuses has been increasing rapidly in North America (Adamle, Riley, & Carlson, 2009; Huss, 2012). There is a historic absence, however, of measuring the outcomes of AAls (Borrego et al, 2014).

A recent study by Dell et al. (2015), titled *PAWSing student stress: A pilot evaluation study of the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program on three university campuses in Canada*, measured the concepts of love and support for if and how students experience them, as well as key outcomes from past studies (e.g., stress, anxiety, happiness, participation). Feedback was collected from students, Therapy Dog handlers and observers. With a sample of 403 program attendees (90% students) and 16 handlers/observers at the events and 87 students at follow-up, it was found that, similar to the Carleton University Resident Therapy Dog Program, the Therapy Dogs offer love and support. "Love is understood as having reciprocal love for the dogs and gaining positive feelings from visiting with them. Support is understood as de-stressing and relaxing by interacting with the dogs" (p. 332-333).

The paper shares that "[t]he findings of this pilot evaluation study are important for a number of reasons. First, there are few studies evaluating the outcomes of AAA programs on university campuses, and none in Canada that measure the outcomes of the SJA [St. John Ambulance] Therapy Dog program. Drawing on data collected at three institutions... [t]he findings, coupled with recent literature...raise particular concern about the heightened levels of stress students may be experiencing, particularly female students. These findings can contribute substantially to current policy discussions and emerging research in the university student mental health and AAI fields" (p. 354).

Shannon's Handler Reflections

From September 2016 - April 2017, upon incorporating Blue the Therapy Dog into my front-line work in student residences at Carleton University, I immediately recognized that I was able to connect with students on a level unparalleled by my other professional interactions. Offering a Therapy Dog in the residence counselling office quickly facilitated a number of student referrals from me to counsellors, and provided an outlet for students who simply needed a visit with a dog to cope with their everyday stresses. Together, myself and Blue were able to support students through many personal issues, ranging from missing home to larger problems like drug addiction and financial crisis. I witnessed that the students who came to see Blue were more open to accessing other supports, and those who needed referrals were more easily introduced to other resources during their time in residence.

In September 2017, Blue and I were approached by the University to transition to a new role working in the Centre for Initiatives in Education for the 2017-2018 academic year. In this new position we were to work on a support and retention initiative dedicated to students in the Enriched Support Program (ESP) and Indigenous Enriched Support Program (IESP). These programs are for students who might not meet traditional entrance requirements to university. ESP/IESP students are provided extra support to ensure student success, including academic and transitional peer supports, personalized seminar classes and workshops, Procrastination Buster study sessions, and now Blue as the resident Therapy Dog.

Blue and I also continue with scheduled visits in student residences. As well, we make appearances at study sessions as an incentive for students to attend, and ideally increase their productivity. Lastly, Blue and I visit classes to encourage student attendance at the Therapy Dog program and provide guest talks, answering student questions about im-

portant differences between Blue and other working dogs on campus. It is my experience that all of these initiatives build and enhance a community feel within the ESP/IESP program specifically, and on Carleton University campus generally, and add a sense of morale for the students. There is no better illustration than the following testimonial offered from a student who visits Blue on a regular basis:

One unique experience to the facility is Blue, the therapy dog. He is a youthful, friendly dog who is there for the students. Twice a week he comes to the office and plays, sits patiently, and eats from the hands of students who go for pet therapy. Whether they are missing their own pets from home, or if they are trying to get over their fear of dogs, or even if they are looking to become a therapy dog trainer one day, all types of students visit. I get the pleasure of sitting in on Blue's office hour once a week. I get to meet other students that come and go, where I can find out a little bit about them. As much as I get some insight on the students, so does Blue. He reacts differently with each grouping of students, responding to their energy. The smiles and laughter he brings to the room immediately turn any poor situation into a good one and this is why we see more recurring faces every week. For one full hour everyone in that room is happy and all the stressors or daunting homework are forgotten. For one whole hour, new waves of people come and go as they can escape their realities. And for one whole hour I get to witness recurring joy, each time with grins and a wagging tail.

-Carleton University Student



Practice & Research Recommendations

- 🐾 Identify and measure the specific objectives of the Resident Therapy Dog Program at Carleton University. This will necessarily include accounting for the specific and potentially evolving program goals and objectives.
- 🐾 Collect data from the Therapy Dog handler, given the small sample size here, even for a pilot study.
- 🐾 Conduct interviews and focus groups in the next stage of the research for more in-depth understanding of the program's benefits and challenges.
- 🐾 Follow-up with students to determine if and what the long-term benefits of the program are.
- 🐾 Follow-up on the finding that *all of the students indicated that they would recommend such events as the Resident Therapy Dog Program to others.*

More than a Best Friend

A recent study of three Ottawa-Based human-animal connection programs, concluded that “[i]t is not difficult to make the case for human-animal connection programs to animal lovers, but the more quantifiable benefits of the programs have been more difficult to measure. The question of evaluating the impact of these kinds of programs has been a challenge in the past, but as programs grow in number, there is increased understanding of how and what to measure to determine program impact” (Measured Outcome, 2016:, p. 14). Visit: www.measuredoutcome.org

PILOT STUDY CONCLUSION

The outcomes/effects of the Carleton University Resident Therapy Dog Program substantiate the idea of offering students a sense of love and support. In turn, love and support are interpreted by the students as a means to reduce stress from their studies.

This Fact Sheet is one in a series. The findings of the Fact Sheets cannot be compared to one another because the AAI programs vary in clients, approaches and species.



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