



A Theoretical Basis for Including Pets in Behavior Modification Approaches

By: Working Together Pet Programs LLC

Client-Centered

- By teaching a client clicker training and demonstrating praise approximations, a parallel process may be drawn between what “shaping” looks like in the animal and human world.
- Reviewing the strategy of positive reinforcement with a developmentally-appropriate adolescent leads to clients brainstorming shaping techniques that might help at home.
- Offering client positive regard and praise as they affirm the dog through training is empowering and positively reinforces desired behaviors of assertiveness, impulse control, patience, etc.

Transferrability and Buy-In

- Externalizing behavior in children often takes the form of aggression, impulsivity, and defiance. These complaints are responsible for the highest percentage of child outpatient and inpatient referrals and, consequently, the majority of funding.
- Researchers (Rabbit et al., 2014) compared four treatment groups (control/“wait and see,” medication, psychotherapy, and animal-assisted therapy) for efficacy through caregiver report of diminishing externalizing symptoms.
- AAT was preferred over medication or waiting for the behavior to subside and rated by 81% of parents as “high” or “very high” in efficacy (Rabbit et al., 2014).
- The heightened approval by parents leads to increased buy-in and support when transferring skills between environments.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

- Clinicians explore a client’s disruptive and angry behaviors and how they might impact the therapy dog (i.e. sudden movements causing the dog to startle). Beyond exercising empathy, this outline of causality demonstrates a new way of thinking about behavior to the client.
- Clients can practice thought stopping and thought modification as projective exercises to transfer the skills internally.
- Adding trusted animals into the protocol for TF-CBT increases skill transferability and relaxation, leaving a more lasting healing impact.

Child Centered Play Therapy

- Pet inclusion, through projection (or storytelling) catalyzes the process (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). This might be observed when a clinician tracks behaviors and appropriate emotional responses in session, directed at the animal.
- Moreover, by enhancing client’s view of the counselor and acting as support in ways that may be unprofessional for a therapist (i.e. touch, stroke, hug), the animal serves as a way for the client to engage more intimately with the therapy on both a physical and mental level, which is particularly key for children in an atypical play therapy environment. The added medium eases the therapeutic space and invites the client to engage.

Motivational Interviewing

- After quick engagement through interaction with a dog in through training, clients are able to develop their own direction and motivation for change with planning conversations facilitated by the counselor.
- Targets focus and concentration while requiring effective communication and assertiveness.
- Models a situation where violence is not required for compliance and if appropriately rewarded, this desired behavior will be reinforced.

Pet Presence

- Clinicians explore client’s disruptive and angry behaviors and how they might impact the therapy dog (i.e. sudden movements causing the dog to startle). Beyond exercising empathy, this outline of causality demonstrates a new way of thinking about behavior to the client.
- Hunt and Chizkov (2014) argue that in treating anxiety and depression, this arousal “sets the stage” (Hunt & Chizkov, 2014) for clinicians to challenge maladaptive beliefs. Therefore, they wanted to know if animals calming presence would negatively impact the CBT process.
- What they found, however, is that participants in the animal-assisted condition reported significantly less anxious symptoms than those in the no-dog condition.
- Further, the presence of the dog was just as effective as the traditional approach, demonstrating that pet-assisted models of improving mental health is a more desirable way to achieve the same important goals.