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Exploring the Use of Animal Assisted Therapy in School Counseling: Using AAT with Adolescents Who Have Internalizing Disorders

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Exploring the Use of Animal Assisted Therapy in School Counseling:
Using AAT with Adolescents Who Have Internalizing Disorders

Leah Jagodzinski

A Research Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Master of Science Degree in
Counselor Education at
Winona State University

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss current trends among adolescents with internalizing disorders such as anxiety and depression and to propose the use of animal assisted therapy to intervene with this population. Discussion will center on the use of animal assisted therapy in school counseling to supplement interventions for students who have internalizing disorders, as well as for use in classroom guidance. Types of therapy animals discussed at length will include be dogs and small mammals with a specific focus on dogs. In addition, this paper will examine the human-animal bond and the benefits of utilizing the human-animal bond in school counseling. The physiological and emotional impact that animals have on humans will be addressed. Considerations and suggestions for implementing and using therapy animals as tools to supplement a school counseling program will also be discussed.

Winona State University

College of Education

Counselor Education Department

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Exploring the Use of Animal Assisted Therapy in School Counseling:
Using AAT with Adolescents Who Have Internalizing Disorders

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Leah Jagodzinski

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science Degree in

Counselor Education

Capstone Project Supervisor: Dr. Dawnette Cigrand

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Introduction

Animal assisted therapy (AAT) is a unique tool that can be used to supplement therapy or a counseling program. Historically, therapy animals have been used to provide comfort and stress relief for individuals who suffered from mental and emotional illnesses. Therapy animals have been used with veterans returning from war, individuals who had been hospitalized for mental health conditions, as well as in the clinical setting. Although therapy animals have been used in a variety of settings and for a variety of purposes, their impact on the human disposition in each setting has been a positive one (Nebbe, 1991b). It has been speculated that therapy animals have a profound and positive impact on humans as a result of their innate ability to express the three main components of Rogers' Person-Centered therapy: unconditional positive regard, congruency, and empathy (Jenkins, Laux, Ritchie, & Tucker-Gail, 2014).

While therapy animals, specifically dogs and other small mammals, are incredibly beneficial when used in the clinical setting, they can also be used as a tool by school counselors to supplement a comprehensive school counseling program. School counselors and other school staff are often the first individuals who recognize and address impairments in student functioning; therapy animals can be used to supplement interventions for these students (Walley & Grothaus, 2013; Chandler, 2001; Nebbe, 1991b; Nebbe, 1991a; Flom, 2005; Daughhete, Stalls, & Spencer, 2010; Jenkins, Laux, Ritchie, & Tucker-Gail, 2014; Burton, 1995). Therapy animals can be especially helpful when used with individuals who express symptoms of anxiety, depression, or additional internalizing disorders (Geist, 2011; Chandler, 2001; Daughhete, Stalls, & Spencer, 2010; Burton, 1995). This comes as a result of the strong human-animal bond illustrated by the positive physiological and emotional impact that therapy animals have on humans. Individuals who suffer from internalizing disorders often choose to withdraw or

withhold feelings; therapy animals can aid in symptom reduction, help the school counselor to rapidly build rapport and trust with the student in addition to increasing the attractiveness of school counseling services (Daughhete, Stalls, & Spencer, 2010).

The following literature review examines how therapy animals are a positive asset to school counseling programs and how they can be utilized when working with students who express symptoms of internalizing disorders. In addition, a discussion of current viewpoints on anxiety and depression, how AAT can moderate associated symptoms, and considerations for AAT implementation will follow.

Review of Literature

Depression and Anxiety in Adolescents

Anxiety and depression often manifest in adolescents when social supports are lost, when physical activity is lacking, or when an adolescent experiences a significant loss of self-esteem or self-confidence (Skrove, Romundstad & Indredavik, 2012). Among school-aged individuals, these events can be provoked by a number of stressors that many children and adolescents face. Difficulty with school work is often a trigger for episodes of anxiety and depression, as well as a variety of other internalizing disorders (Gaspar de Matos, Barrett, Dadds, & Shortt, 2008). It is common for students to experience anxiety in an academic core area; if this anxiety is not quickly identified and the student does not receive an appropriate intervention, the anxiety can also appear in other parts of the individual's life. In addition, children and adolescents often develop internalizing disorders when faced with stressful events in their peer relationships (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000). Individuals who experience these peer relationship difficulties often report a loss in self-esteem in addition to depressive symptoms and social anxiety. These events, when combined with academic, social, and personal expectations of oneself, may lead to

stress and discontent. When not managed properly, stress can develop into generalized anxiety, depression, or another internalizing disorder (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000).

Friendship issues, family strain, and academic challenges are nearly unavoidable concerns among school-aged students, and these issues often result in mental and emotional discontent. Anxiety disorders affect 6.1% of adolescents while 10.7% of adolescents experience depressive symptoms; however, self-report scales have yielded higher percentages (Skrove, Romundstad & Indredavik, 2012). Research by Gaspar de Matos, Barrett, Dadds, and Shortt. (2008) suggests that as children progress through grade levels, symptoms of internalizing disorders increase in prevalence in both males and females. If left untreated, anxiety and depression can foster poor psychosocial adjustment, maladaptive coping strategies, and poor academic performance (Walley & Grothaus, 2013; Gaspar de Matos, Barrett, Dadds, & Shortt, 2008). Still, research by Erford, et al. (2007) suggests that only 20% of students suffering from depression or anxiety receive mental health care, despite the harmful consequences. Of those students who seek mental health services, 30% to 60% do not finish therapy (French, Reardon, & Smith, 2003). It is suggested by French, Reardon, and Smith that adolescents often drop out of counseling prior to finishing because of a fear of judgment by the counselor, a lack of therapy attractiveness, as well as a lack of accessibility to the counseling. As indicated by the statistics, mental health issues are increasingly prevalent among school-aged youth, yet a number of those individuals do not receive counseling or discontinue counseling as a result of a number of issues. Considering the negative academic and social consequences of anxiety and depression, it is necessary to provide these school-aged individuals with readily accessible counseling services in a positive and non-judgmental atmosphere.

The Role of the School Counselor

School is often the place where mental health issues are initially recognized and addressed by school staff; it is also often the most viable and convenient place for students to seek help, counseling, or an intervention for their depression or anxiety (Walley & Grothaus, 2013). The individuals who most often intervene with students who present with symptoms of anxiety or depression are the school counselors. According to ASCA, it is the role of the school counselor to help guide and facilitate student academic achievement and social and emotional development through an assortment of counseling methods and interventions (ASCA, 2012). To implement these methods and interventions, school counselors have the unique opportunity to use a variety of tools, which can supplement their district's comprehensive school counseling program. One such tool used by school counselors is a therapy animal (Chandler, 2001; Nebbe, 1991b; Nebbe, 1991a; Flom, 2005; Daughhetee, Stalls, & Spencer, 2010; Jenkins, Laux, Ritchie, & Tucker-Gail, 2014). The use of a therapy animal by a school counselor is often referred to as animal assisted therapy or AAT. Specifically, AAT is defined as "the use of therapeutic mediators in the counseling relationship" (Jenkins, Laux, Ritchie, & Tucker-Gail, 2014, p. 174). Therapy animals can be used as a tool by the school counselor in a variety of ways.

The school counselor can use AAT to facilitate student achievement in both the academic and social realms of school. Sand Lake Elementary school counselor Amy Kobs (2014) discussed that therapy animals are especially helpful when used with students who express symptoms of internalizing disorders; she says this comes as a result of the patience and non-judgmental nature of the therapy animal. Kobs discussed that she often uses her therapy dog, Odin, as a part of a reward system for students who meet academic or behavioral goals and as part of a Tier 1 intervention for students who have or are at risk for depression and anxiety. The school counselor can use therapy animals in individual and group counseling, to supplement

guidance lessons, to relieve student stress, and to help the school counselor provide a positive and welcoming atmosphere in his or her school counseling office. Therapy animals in the school setting reinforce the appeal of the school counselor and the counseling process to students who may be in need of counseling; they can also be used to facilitate the development of a positive rapport between the school counselor and the students (Daughhetee, Stalls, & Spencer, 2010).

History of AAT

Animals were first used as therapy tools in 1792 when the Quakers of England used small animals (i.e. gerbils, hamsters, rabbits) to help promote a sense of normalcy among patients at “The York Retreat”, an institution for the mentally ill (Nebbe, 1991a). Patients would care for the animals with the intent that this contact would be therapeutic by promoting a sense of responsibility and accomplishment for the patients. The use of animals in therapy was considered “revolutionary” for the time period; nearly 80 years later in 1867, therapy animals were used with patients with epilepsy in Germany. In 1942, the use of therapy animals was popularized in the United States via the use of therapy dogs with soldiers returning from war. It was found that the dogs would help to relax the veterans and promote stress relief for soldiers struggling with mental and emotional complications.

Eleven years after dogs were used therapeutically with American soldiers, child psychologist Boris Levinson discovered the benefits of using his dog in therapy sessions with children, as well (Nebbe, 1991a). Levinson, often referred to as the father of AAT, occasionally allowed his personal dog to sit in on his therapy sessions with children; through these experiences, he quickly identified the benefits of client-canine interaction during therapy sessions. Levinson learned that previously unresponsive clients would open up in the presence of the therapy dog and quicker progress could be made with these children using a therapy dog

as a “co-therapist” (Nebbe, 1991a; Chandler, 2001, p 2). Levison continued his work with animal therapy in the counseling setting and eventually became a credible pioneer of the animal therapy movement. Considering the ways in which animals have historically been used as therapeutic tools for individuals who have mental health concerns, it is not surprising that the use of animal assisted therapy and animal assisted therapy and activity in schools has experienced an increase in popularity in recent years (Chandler, 2001).

The Professional School Counselor and AAT

Implementing a therapy dog as a tool in a school counseling program has been shown to be beneficial for both the school counselor as well as the students. Research by Burton (1995) suggests that by including a therapy dog in sessions with students, the school counselor is able to more easily and quickly establish a positive therapeutic relationship with students. Additionally, students will often gravitate toward the school counseling office to interact with the therapy animal; as a result, the school counselor is able to reach more students than he or she would have been able to without the therapy animal (Burton, 1995; Chandler, 2001). Simply, students who may have been reluctant to seek out counseling receive the help they need because a therapy animal is present. The use of therapy animals in classroom guidance lesson delivery has also been shown to be beneficial when used to promote pro-social behaviors in children, in addition to instilling in students the importance of responsibility and respect (Daughhetee, Stalls, Spencer, 2010). The reason for positive human response to animals comes as a result of the unique human-animal bond.

The Human-Animal Bond

There is a wealth of research dedicated to the unique human-animal bond, which Nebbe (1991b) refers to as “magic” in the counseling session. Animal assisted therapy (AAT) has been used with hospitalized children, individuals with dementia, children with disabilities, hospitalized psychiatric patients, and a wide variety of other individuals (Daughetee, Stalls, & Spencer, 2010). The use of animals with these individuals has been shown to promote a significant reduction in stress, a calming environment, and provide a sense of comfort for those who are experiencing distress (Geist, 2011). Animals also have the unique ability to calm individuals who are experiencing tense or negative emotions while simultaneously fostering an environment that mentally energizes the individual. The reason for the special connection between humans and animals has been widely speculated in related research, but a clear explanation for the relationship appears to be lacking (Nebbe, 1991b). However, Levinson contends that animals help humans to reconnect with nature. That is, when humans experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem or a variety of other mental health ailments, Levinson believes that the disconnect between the individual and nature is the reason, and animals can help to bridge that disconnect (Geist, 2011; Nebbe, 1991b). Although the specific reason for the human-animal bond has been speculated, the ease of the relationship is clear. The simplicity of the human-animal relationship is illustrated by the responses of children and adolescents to animals, even when physical contact with the animal is lacking.

Affective influence of AAT. Friesen (2010) discusses the positive impact that the mere presence of a dog in a classroom has on students. In the instance that a dog would accompany a teacher or another adult in a classroom of children or adolescents, Friesen found that students were more willing to participate in class discussion, cooperate with the adults in the class, and

remain more attentive than when a dog was not present. This finding exemplifies the strength of the human-animal bond by illustrating the tendency of students to exhibit better behavior and more pro-social characteristics in the presence of an animal. Additionally, viewing animals perform various activities was linked with feelings of pleasure and happiness. Geist (2011) referenced research performed at Hill Top Academy in Pennsylvania, which is an educational institution that provides emotional support services for elementary, middle, and high school students. Students who were distressed and visiting the school counselor and the therapy dog would often crack a smile when the therapy animal would perform simple acts (i.e. nudging the student's hand to throw a toy). Repeated performance of these acts would encourage more smiles and often laughter from the student. Geist discussed that laughter prompts the release of endorphins which, in turn, helps to alleviate the student of anxiety or depressive symptoms; thus creating a more comforting and accepting atmosphere in the counseling office. Although experience with animals in clinical or school settings has been shown to be beneficial for children and adolescents, interacting with animals in casual, everyday situations has been shown to be just as valuable.

Physiological influence of AAT. Research by Friesen (2010) suggests that individuals who own or have owned pets are significantly more social, more positive, and exude more positive attitudes than people who have never owned a pet. This finding is significant because it indicates that animals do not need to be therapy animals to have a positive impact on humans. Further, children who grew up with pets were found to express a greater sense of empathy toward others, an even temperament, and a higher level of self-esteem than did children who did not grow up with pets (Nebbe, 1991b). Friesen (2010) also points out that the sheer presence of a dog has the potential to decrease stress in children and adolescents when they are placed in a

stressful situation. One explanation for the decrease in stress is the effect that physical contact with animals has on blood pressure and resting heart rate (Minatrea & Wesley, 2008). Although it has been observed that animals have a positive effect on an individual's emotional and mental well-being, research indicates that the positive effect is a direct result of an animal's ability to promote positive physical well-being, as well. It has been documented that physical contact with animals helps to lower blood pressure in anxious and distressed individuals, in addition to promoting a visible release of tension in individuals who are experiencing mental and emotional distress (Burton, 1995).

Animals Used as Therapy Animals

Therapy animals are used in a variety of settings to help facilitate emotional support for individuals who are in need. A number of hospitals, universities, prisons, schools, assisted living homes, in addition to a variety of other institutions, have embraced the use of therapy animals. A variety of animals such as dogs, horses, and small animals (i.e. gerbils, guinea pigs, rabbits) have been selected to aid in conducting therapy (Chandler, 2001; Daughhetee, Stalls, & Spencer, 2010; Flom, 2005; Nebbe, 1991a; Nebbe, 1991b). These animals have the potential to decrease symptoms of anxiety, lower blood pressure, slow resting heart rate, increase feelings of self-efficacy, relieve stress, help individuals to release physical tension brought on by stress, and promote feelings of happiness and pleasure among individuals who interact with them (Chandler, 2001). However, the population and institution of interest in this paper are school-aged children and adolescents using animal assisted therapy in a school setting; specifically, AAT facilitated by the school counselor.

The School Setting

In school settings, the therapy animals used most often by school counselors are dogs and other small mammals, such as gerbils, guinea pigs, and rabbits. Although small animals, or “pocket pets” as Flom (2005) refers to them, cannot hold the title of a licensed therapy animal, they are still useful in assisting school counselors in a variety of therapeutic and educational settings. These animals are often the most accessible and appropriate tools to supplement a school counseling program, and they are used as interventions for a variety of reasons. Therapy animals are used in school settings by school counselors to help students reduce stress, to relieve symptoms of anxiety and depression, to provide a welcoming and positive atmosphere within the school counseling office, to help students to build self-esteem, and to aid in teaching guidance lessons.

Using pocket pets in classroom guidance. Pocket pets are incredibly helpful when used by school counselors to present guidance lessons (Flom, 2005). Not only are small mammals less of a hazard to the health and safety of students than reptiles or larger animals, they often do not intimidate children as larger animals sometimes do. Incorporating small animals into classroom guidance delivery is an effective way to teach young children the importance of responsibility, in addition to teaching students ways to reduce anxiety, manage stress, and build self-esteem (Daughhettee, Stalls, & Spencer, 2010). Flom (2005) used pocket pets to help elementary students learn how to acclimate to school. She discussed how she uses her pet hamster, Ginger, to teach students about anxiety and help them to come up with ways to reduce feelings of anxiousness when returning to school after the summer, or as a result of personal or academic issues. She has her students observe Ginger in an anxious state and asks them to brainstorm ideas that could help to alleviate the stress and anxiety that Ginger is feeling. She

then asks the students if they could use their suggestions for reducing stress and anxiety in their own lives. As a part of classroom guidance lessons, Flom also has students care for Ginger, which reinforces the importance of individual responsibility. This technique is particularly useful when used as an intervention for students who have issues completing school work or students who have behavioral issues as it helps them to learn personal responsibility and reliability. In addition to using pocket pets, school counselors also use dogs as therapy animals to supplement their school counseling programs.

Using therapy dogs in school counseling. Therapy dogs are among the most common therapy animals used in school settings to assist students who are at-risk for experiencing internalizing disorders, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Jenkins, et al., 2014). When assisting school counselors in individual counseling sessions with students, therapy dogs appear to possess an innate ability to respond appropriately to students who suffer from anxiety or depression. In a study by Friedman, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, and Messent, children were asked to perform a stressful task accompanied by the experimenter, their best friend, or an attentive dog (as cited in Friesen, 2010). The individuals who performed the task with the dog were found to perform the stressful task significantly better than those who were accompanied by the researcher or even their best friend. The participants who were accompanied by a dog were also better able to moderate their stress level than the individuals who were accompanied by the experimenter or their friend. This was illustrated by lower blood pressure and heart rate among the students accompanied by the dog. The researchers hypothesized that these results are a direct effect of the participants' perceived non-judgmental nature and unconditional acceptance by the dog.

Further, research by Geist (2011) suggests that therapy dogs, when utilized in school settings, are able to encourage the physical relaxation and tension release of students when they work with the counselor and the therapy dog. The therapy dogs in Geist's study were highly trained to attune to the feelings of the students; this high level of training also aided the dogs in helping the students to process their feelings in times of crisis and high stress. However, regardless of the training level of therapy dogs, the effect they can have on human emotion and mental health is undeniable. Jenkins et al. (2014) reiterates the positive impact of animal assisted therapy. He discusses the finding that, during therapy with a counselor, the majority of children and adolescents are significantly more likely to disclose intimate, personal information in the presence of a therapy dog and counselor than if only a counselor were present. Although it is not necessary for therapy dogs to be highly trained, it is noted in the research that therapy dogs must be approved and licensed by a pet therapy program (e.g., Coulee Region Humane Society: Ambassadors of Love, Therapy Dogs International) in order for the dogs to receive approval to practice as a therapy animal (Kobs, 2014; Daughhete, Stalls, & Spencer, 2010).

Therapy dogs, while beneficial in individual counseling sessions, have also been shown to be a positive asset to group counseling. A study by Daughhete, Stalls, and Spencer (2010) illustrated the ways in which Newman, a therapy dog, was a positive addition to individual as well as group counseling. In group counseling sessions, Newman's laidback demeanor appeared to help shy and anxious students to open up and relax in the group counseling sessions. In additional research, therapy dogs were found to encourage cohesiveness among participants in group counseling (Minatrea & Wesley, 2008). Minatrea and Wesley explored the effects of using a therapy dog to supplement group counseling for individuals with substance dependency. Group counseling clients reported that the therapy dog was a positive asset to the group

counseling process. Minatrea and Wesley contend that the therapy dog helped to facilitate the rapid formation of a therapeutic alliance between the clients and the counselor in addition to helping the clients in the experimental group experience a greater sense of dedication to the counseling process than did the clients in the control group. Although substance dependency and abuse is often a difficult issue for individuals to disclose, a therapy animal present during group counseling aided in reducing stress and anxiety, referenced by lowered blood pressure readings during the group counseling process.

Using AAT as a Tool in a School Counseling Program

Using a dog as a tool to supplement an elementary school counseling program has been shown to be incredibly beneficial (Kobs, 2014). Not only is it helpful and enjoyable for the students, it also helps school counselors to quickly develop rapport and trust with their students. Research by Burton (1995) suggests that students respond well to animals and are much more likely to approach the school counselor if there is a dog present. Burton, a school counselor, had her therapy dog, Blaze, accompany her in the morning to greet students as they arrived at school. Using this technique, Burton contends that she was able to meet and interact with significantly more students than she would have had Blaze not been present. She also discussed how this technique helped to facilitate a relationship between Blaze and the students. However, Kobs (2014) noted that it is important for students, especially kindergarten students, to learn to feel comfortable around therapy dogs before immersing them into the students' world. Prior to introducing the students to Odin, Kobs' therapy dog, Kobs chose to incorporate books about dogs during guidance lessons and use stuffed animals to introduce the idea of dogs to students who may have never been in contact with one. This was done to ensure that students were not surprised or scared when they saw Odin in the school. After students became familiar with Odin,

Kobs discussed how she began using Odin as a tool to complement PBIS within the elementary school. With regard to PBIS, Odin often helps to supplement Tier 1 interventions with students who have express symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other internalizing disorders.

Therapy animals are used by the school counselor to supplement interventions for students who experience anxiety, depressive symptoms, or low self-esteem (Friesen, 2010). AAT type interventions with these students have been found to be useful because the therapy animal offers the students a non-judgmental and positive outlet to voice their concerns and experiences (Chandler, 2001; Friesen, 2010). This allows students who may have had difficulty disclosing or discovering reasons for their anxiety, depression, or low self-esteem to talk freely and openly about their thoughts and experiences without fear of judgment by the therapy animal

Using Interventions Supplemented by AAT

Using AAT for individual student interventions in the school setting has been shown to be increasingly beneficial for students who experience symptoms of various internalizing disorders (Burton, 1995; Chandler, 2001; Jenkins, Laux, Ritchie, & Tucker-Gail, 2014). School counselors will use therapy animals for these students in a variety of ways. Therapy animals could be utilized in interventions with individual students in a number of ways. The school counselor could arrange for the therapy animal to greet anxious students as they get off of the school bus, or the therapy animal could accompany the student as they meet individually with the school counselor to discuss worries and concerns. (Jenkins, Laux, Ritchie, & Tucker-Gail, 2014). In addition to these individual interventions, the school counselor can also periodically walk the hallways with the therapy dog as a way to interact with students who may not have approached the school counselor had the therapy dog not been with him or her. Kobs (2014) discussed that she uses Odin to supplement interventions for students with anxiety. She stated

that students with self-esteem issues, anxiety, or depression often benefit from being asked to perform certain “special” tasks with Odin. Kobs found that when she would give these students the responsibility of walking Odin down the hall, on a leash, or filling his water dish each time they came to the school counseling office, their demeanor would improve. After having the students perform these tasks with Odin on a weekly basis, the students began to report an increase in self-esteem and a decrease in anxiety and sadness. Flom (1995) reiterates that when students who have mental health concerns are asked to take care of an animal, they experience less anxiety and are likely to experience an increase in self-esteem.

Therapy animals are also helpful when used in individual counseling, as well. AAT is generally referred to as a type of person focused therapy because animals mirror the core characteristics of person-centered therapy (Jenkins, Laux, Ritchie, & Tucker-Gail, 2014). Research on using AAT in a school counseling program has shown that an effective technique to encourage students to participate in counseling is to compare their experiences to those of the therapy animal. Burton (1995) suggests asking the student for possible solutions or goals that could help to relieve them from their anxieties. If they have trouble coming up with goals, Burton will ask them what Blaze could do if he was anxious or sad. Burton found that it is much easier for students to brainstorm goals for Blaze than it is for them to think of ideas to alleviate their anxiety. She then would encourage a discussion about using the goals they suggested for Blaze in their own lives. She found that method to be rather successful. In addition, because students with mental health issues are often vulnerable to stressors, some researchers have found it to be beneficial for students to simply have the company of a therapy animal while talking to the counselor (Minatrea & Wesley, 2008; Chandler, 2001). Chandler (2001) contends that students disclose more when a therapy animal is present because contact with animals helps

individuals to focus; thus, this helps them to get in touch with their inner feelings and concerns. Additional research performed by Jalongo, Astorino, and Bomboy (2004) suggests that children have a natural tendency to let down their emotional guard when in the presence of an animal. A large majority of children also prefer to confide in animals. This makes AAT especially helpful when working with children who have “severe emotional problems and behavioral disorders” (p.10).

In addition to individual therapy sessions, school counselors can use therapy dogs to supplement classroom guidance and group therapy sessions. Even when the guidance lesson is not tailored around the therapy dog, Friesen (2010) discusses the tendency of all school-aged students to behave and pay better attention to the adult in the room when the therapy dog is present. As a result of this, students are better able to comprehend and appreciate the guidance lesson. Relatedly, Minatrea and Wesley (2008) discuss the benefits of using a therapy animal to enhance group counseling sessions for individuals with substance abuse issues. This finding can also be applied when supplementing group counseling in the school setting with a therapy animal.

Considerations When Using AAT in Schools

Although using AAT to supplement a school counseling program has a number of benefits, there are still issues regarding allowing a therapy animal into a school. These issues need to be considered prior to implementing AAT in the program. In order for therapy dogs to be used in schools, it is crucial that the dogs are first licensed to practice as therapy dogs. The licensing process entails assessing the dog’s temperament as well as the dog’s capacity for human interaction (Burton, 1995; Daughetee, Stalls, & Spencer, 2010). If the dog passes all of the required screenings and temperament tests, they then become a licensed therapy dog and are

able to act as a co-counselor with a licensed community counselor or school counselor.

However, the mere presence of a therapy animal still poses some risk to certain groups of individuals within the school.

Animal allergies are a concern that needs to be addressed prior to allowing therapy animals into the school. To reduce allergy concerns in the presence of a therapy animal, students and staff can take steps to reduce the transfer of allergens from the therapy animal to individuals who may have allergies. Initially, it is important that the school counselor select a therapy animal that sheds minimally, that is regularly groomed and bathed, and that is also current on all vaccinations (Friesen, 2010). After the therapy animal has been approved for and implemented in the school counseling program, students and staff can reduce allergy concerns by employing a few preventative measures. For example, Friesen suggests that students and staff always wash their hands prior to and after having contact with the therapy animal to help reduce the spread of dander. Therapy animals should also be treated with “anti-allergen powder” to minimize allergic reactions by students who may have allergies (Friesen, 2010, p. 262). In addition to allergy concerns, counselors who handle therapy animals should also maintain an awareness of the potential of disobedient and/or aggressive behavior by the dog.

Although trained and licensed therapy animals are highly unlikely to express aggressive behavior, it is still important for school faculty and students to learn the appropriate ways to interact with the therapy animal (Friesen, 2010; Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004). To help students to learn how to interact with therapy animals in the school setting, Kobs (2014) suggested using guidance lessons to teach and inform students the correct ways to handle a therapy animal. Jalongo, Astorino, and Bomboy (2004) also discuss that it is important for the school counselor who is handling the dog, as well as other school staff, to remain sensitive to

fears of dogs as well as culturally influenced views of dogs. Though, if a student who initially has negative feelings toward the therapy animal requests that they would like to learn to interact with the animal, it is important that the school counselor and other school staff respect that request and slowly help the student to feel comfortable with the therapy animal (Kobs, 2014).

While the feelings and well-being of students and staff in a school that employs the use of AAT are important, the well-being and safety of the therapy animal are also necessary aspects to consider (Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004; Friesen, 2010). Friesen (2010) discusses the importance of remaining mindful of signals given by the dog, which could indicate exhaustion or restlessness. In order for the therapy dog to provide the best therapy and counseling assistance to the school counselor as well as the students, it is crucial to respond to signs such as excessive licking, shaking, withdrawal or other signs which could indicate stress. An appropriate response to these signs could be only bringing the therapy animal to the school two to three days per week as well as limiting the time the therapy animal spends with large groups of individuals (Kobs, 2014). Providing adequate breaks for exercise and food are also necessary for the therapy dog; these breaks can help the animal to reenergize and reduce stress. Considering the safety and well-being of the therapy dog as well as assessing for each individual child's "suitability for interaction with the dogs" is highly recommended when working with children while using animal assisted therapy (Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004, p. 15).

In addition to preparing students for the therapy animal, remaining mindful of the feelings of students, ensuring that the therapy animal is licensed, and taking steps to maintain good mental and emotional health of the therapy animal, it is essential to obtain the permission of every parent or guardian of every student in the school prior to introducing a therapy animal into a school (Friesen, 2009; Nebbe, 1991a; Kobs, 2014). Obtaining permission from parents or

guardians is often the final and most challenging hurdle regarding the process. In a personal interview with Kobs (2014), she shared that she sends out permission forms to every parent or guardian at the beginning of every school year, prior to bringing the animal into the school. Of the parents or guardians who state on the permission form that they do not want a therapy animal at their child's school, Kobs will call them and lead a discussion regarding their disapproval for the therapy animal at the school. Often, parents will share that their reasoning behind their disapproval is a result of their child's fear or allergy to animals but they would be willing to allow a therapy animal into their child's school if the proper steps are taken to help their child feel comfortable. Of course, if parents still are reluctant, school counselors should abide by the decision of the parent.

Conclusion

Research on AAT has illustrated that although anxiety and depression are serious issues among adolescents, school counselors can help to aid in symptom reduction by using therapy animals to supplement interventions for these students. Therapy animals are not only useful for providing emotional relief from internalizing disorders, they can also significantly reduce the physiological symptoms of depression and anxiety. While the effectiveness and benefits of using therapy animals in the school setting are clear, it must be noted that there are several considerations that must be addressed prior to allowing the therapy animal (notably, dogs) into the school. In addition to limitations regarding implementation, there are also multiple gaps in the research with specific regard to the ways in which using therapy animals in a school setting impact the well-being and emotional balance of students with depression or anxiety. This is an opportunity for future quantitative research in the area of using AAT in schools.

Although the use of AAT in schools, by a school counselor, is relatively new and uncharted, the multitude of benefits illustrated by the current research is encouraging for both individuals who suffer from internalizing disorders, as well as school counselors. AAT can encourage participation by students who suffer from internalizing disorders in school counseling, in addition to aiding in the development of a trusting therapeutic relationship between the student and the school counselor. As a result of the unique human-animal bond, the future of the field of AAT in schools to reduce symptoms of internalizing disorders among students is both exciting and motivating.

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