

The Effects of Animal Assisted Therapy on Communication and Social Skills: A Meta-Analysis

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Abstract

A meta-analysis was conducted to determine the effectiveness of Animal Assisted Therapy procedures (AAT) on the communication and social skills of several categories of individuals. The inclusion criteria for the articles were: (1) to be published in English, (2) to cover the AAT domain, (3) to utilize a control group, and (4) to offer enough data to allow the calculation of the effect size (*d* Cohen's) of the AAT interventions on the social and communication skills. Four studies met the selection criteria. A large effect size was found for the effects of AAT programs on improving the communication and social skills of individuals participating to the studies. Also, several variables moderating the effects of AAT were identified, such as: the type of animal used and its level of training, the method of therapy administration (i.e., individual, group or mixed), the type of measurement and the number and duration of the sessions. Further research is needed to clarify the functional mechanisms of AAT. However, the current meta-analysis indicates that AAT might function as a complementary therapy in the treatment of communication and social skills deficits.

Keywords

AAT, animal assisted therapy, communication, social skills, meta-analysis