


Chapter 18

Engaging Adolescents With ASD in Animal-Assisted Therapy: Benefits of Human-Animal Bond

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents with autism spectrum disorder lack social competence. Considering the chronic nature of the disorder, it becomes essential to focus on this critical developmental phase. For people with ASD, animal-assisted interventions appear to help enhance social functioning. This chapter aimed to explore whether therapy animals could help adolescents with ASD become more socially adept through research utilizing an AB single-case experimental design with two adolescents. The participants were measured on social competence, attention, and memory. Over a month, the intervention was given twice a week for 45–60 minutes, resulting in 8 therapy sessions. With the assistance of a trained dog, a licensed clinical psychologist delivered the AAT sessions. Results show that AAT helps improve social competence alongside fostering better attention and memory. The chapter highlights the role of human-animal interactions in the developmental period of adolescence with ASD.

INTRODUCTION

“The day I will never forget. On my second last day at the Centre where I was working with people diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, there was a 10-year-old boy named Amit, with whom I just finished my therapy session. I worked with him for 4 months with my therapy dog, Loki, to improve his social skills and competence. As I was coming to an end with this routine and because I had to leave the place after the completion of the study, my heart was feeling heavier. While wrapping up the session, this boy approached me and said, “Hemangi ma’am is upset.” I could not believe what he said. Knowing him, struggling to understand emotions, and having difficulty verbally expressing them, this was his identification of my feelings, which he accurately presented with the term ‘upset.’ That moment, I felt the influential role an animal-assisted therapy can play in helping people learn emotions and express themselves better.”

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WHAT IS ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY?

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a novel approach incorporating human-animal interactions for the client's benefit. Adjunct to traditional therapies, animal-assisted therapy has been built on the principles of different theories and phenomena. One of the important ones is Wilson's Biophilia Hypothesis (1986). The Biophilia Hypothesis proposes that as humans, we want connections with nature and other living things. This tendency is what helps us develop bonds and relationships with other animals. Attachment theory also talks about how human beings can develop attachments with other animals upon which therapeutic relationships can be built (Parish-Plass, 2013). Some neurobiological theories talk about an increase in oxytocin levels among humans after interactions with animals, which helped reduce anxiety and increase pain tolerance while promoting communication and trust (Menna et al., 2019; Marcus, 2013; Clark et al., 2020). As a non-pharmacological method, animal-assisted therapy has been increasingly getting popular in the western world. It has also gained popularity as a form of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) practice.

Animal-assisted Therapy has been defined as structured, goal-oriented therapy with the help of a qualified, trained animal who works as a supplemental agent of change in the therapeutic process with the client (Chandler, 2022). AAT has been found to be helpful in different physical and psychological conditions not limited to cancer, dementia, neurodevelopmental disorders, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, etc. (Çakıcı & Kök, 2020). While AAT has been helpful in various such conditions, the focus of this book chapter is on adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). AAT is very popular in this condition, especially with children with ASD. Considering the chronic nature of the disorder, discussing the developmental trajectory of ASD becomes important in terms of the adolescence period.

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER AND TEEN YEARS

Diagnosed reported cases of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder have been increasing at an alarming rate in the last three decades. Autism Spectrum Disorders are the most commonly diagnosed disorder across the globe (Baxter et al., 2015). Literature well establishes different issues associated with ASD and its implications on mental health. Although the focus has been more on the childhood period because of the need for early identification and intervention, the clinical presentation of ASD may change over time and cannot be ignored. The essential characteristics of ASD remain throughout life.

According to the studies, follow-up studies conducted with those diagnosed with ASD reported psychological outcomes being poor (Billstedt et al., 2005). From the reports, it was found that only 50% of those with ASD develop useful language by adolescence. The adolescence period can have effects in terms of heightening sensory sensitivity, wherein some can become more sensitive to changes that happen in the body during puberty (Dow-Edwards et al., 2019). Because of the changes in physical growth, sexual development, and hormonal fluctuations, coping becomes challenging for the teen (Hamdan, 2022). Other health-related issues like epilepsy, sleep disturbances, or gastrointestinal issues may be more prominent during the teenage years (Mannion & Leader, 2016). In this regard, females diagnosed with ASD appear to be worse off than adolescent males (Billstedt et al., 2005).

As known, individuals with ASD are more prone to developing psychological health issues such as depression and anxiety due to emotion regulation difficulties and lack of social adaptation skills (Cai, 2018). This risk can be exacerbated during the adolescent period. Increased social demands and higher

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