

Animal-Assisted Therapy Intervention for Sexually Abused Youth

Dietz, T., Davis, D., & Pennings, J. (2012). Evaluating animal assisted therapy in group treatment for child sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 21(6), 665–683. doi:10.1080/10538712.2012.726700

What is the study about? This study compared three unique interventions to assess the effectiveness of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) with 153 children who experienced sexual abuse. The 3 interventions included Dogs With Stories, Dogs Without Stories, and a no-dog control condition. Clients were ages 7-17 who were treated at a Child Advocacy Center (CAC) during the study.

All Groups Followed the Same Protocol

Clients were able to start the group when they felt most comfortable and each group consisted of a total of 12 therapy sessions.

GROUP 1: NO DOGS

No therapy dogs were present.

GROUP 2: DOGS WITHOUT STORIES

CAC slowly implemented certified therapy dogs and their caregivers once per month. Handlers were available 30 minutes prior to group to allow children to become comfortable with the dogs. The owner and the dog were involved for 10-15 minutes at a time.

GROUP 3: DOGS WITH STORIES

Therapeutic stories were presented from the dog's perspective and related to the group's topic. The goal was to give children a safe outlet to express themselves as well as provide structure to the group.

How was the study done? This study applied the Trauma Symptom Checklist (TSCC) to measure the symptoms reported by the children. The TSCC is a 54-item measurement tool that examines participants' experiences across several subscales. To measure change, the TSCC was administered before the participants started the group intervention as well as at the last group session.

What did the study find? Those assigned to the Dogs With Stories and Dogs Without Stories groups reported a significant decline in symptoms of anxiety, depression, PTSD, and dissociation after the intervention. The most significant reduction in scores was seen on the PTSD and Depression subscales, while sexual concerns and anger subscales showed no change after intervention. *Note: participants in the Dogs With Stories group had higher rates of reported sexual abuse than the other groups.

Why is this study important?

- This was the first study to assess AAT in a group therapy setting with Child Sexual Abuse survivors.
- Children sexually abused suffer significant long-term adverse effects.
- This study offers a promising intervention for children with a sexual abuse history who are experiencing anxiety, depression, & PTSD.

Implications for Social Work Practice

- Clients' religious or cultural beliefs should be considered as some may not fit with the values of AAT.
- Training and education are necessary to ensure the intervention is implemented appropriately.
- Options for clients with animal allergies should be considered.