

Therapeutic Applications of Animal-Assisted Therapy with Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused

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Purpose:

To study the efficacy of registered therapy animals and volunteer handlers as adjuncts to licensed professionals during individual therapy with children who have been sexually abused.

Background:

A nonprofit animal-assisted therapy (AAT) organization teamed with a county outreach center for sexually abused children to develop this program. Licensed therapists attend a three-hour AAT workshop while volunteers receive twelve hours of training on sexual abuse. Therapists conduct intake questionnaires (based on the Boat Inventory) on candidate children to determine prior experiences with animals, animal abuse history, and interest in AAT. Therapists then match animals and handlers based on therapy goals, client history and gender issues. Therapists and handlers meet prior to sessions to discuss specific goals and modalities, then debrief afterwards to modify treatment plans as needed.

Modalities:

Therapists lead sessions while handlers facilitate child-animal interactions. Most children display inappropriate affect. Because several of the therapy animals lived in foster homes after rescue from abusive situations, children immediately empathize with the animals and ask questions about their experiences and feelings. Animals' behavior and nonverbal communication expedite discussions on interpersonal relationships. Handlers demonstrate proper ways to touch animals which therapists relate to children's boundary issues. Handlers model caring for animals, especially for children who witnessed or participated in animal abuse.

Outcomes and Research Implications:

A research study into psycho-social impacts of children in AAT compared to a control group is underway. To date, all children displayed significant affective changes during AAT compared to sessions with therapists alone. Despite initial concerns that volunteer handlers would inhibit client openness, the presence of both handlers and animals actually furthered client disclosures. The center plans to expand AAT to children's group therapy as well as to treatment programs for abusive parents.