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Animal-assisted therapy with children with autism spectrum disorder

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Abstract

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are characterized by deficits in social reciprocity and communication, and by restricted, repetitive behaviors. Interventions based on the use of the human/animal bond have the potential to overcome the difficulty of children with ASD to interact effectually with others targeting core symptoms of this disorder. This exploratory descriptive study analyzes the effects of designed activities on children with ASD with an emphasis on social behaviors, language, and fine motor skills. The study was guided by Brickel's learning theory and the social mediation theory. The presence f a trained therapy animal, its unprompted behaviors, and its readiness for interaction may provide opportunities and benefits that would be impossible in its absence. The possible mechanisms responsible for the beneficial effects observed are discussed. After six weeks, an increase in social behavior, direct communication, attention span, and decreased anxiety. The purpose of this study is to improve the well-being of children with ASD as a whole and improve their quality of life using animal-assisted therapy.

Conclusion: Although the results described here are encouraging, further research with better designs and using larger samples is needed to strengthen translation of such interventions to the clinic. In addition, potential applications of analyzing child-dog interactions are highlighted to screen for early signs of the disorder.

Biography

William S. Pope holds a doctorate in ministry and nursing. He is the coordinator of the animal-assisted therapy program of Auburn University School of Nursing and president of CAREing Paws, an animal therapy group in East Alabama.

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