
Animal Assisted Activity: effects in communication and interpersonal relations inside the school environment

Atividade Assistida por Animais:
efeitos na comunicação e interação social
em ambiente escolar

Actividad Asistida por Animales:
efectos sobre la comunicación
y la interacción social en el entorno escolar

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Abstract

The Animal Assisted Interventions cover Activity, Education, and Animal Assisted Therapy (A/E/AAT). AAA is defined as informal interactions by visits done to health and educational institutions for motivational, educational, and recreational purposes. Dogs were introduced to a day care-school's routine. The subject was an 11-year-old male, part of a group of five children selected by pedagogy director. The complaint was that the subject showed aggressiveness, hyperactivity, frequent isolation behavior, physical fights, and refusal to participate on group activities. It was proposed motivational activities of concentration, patience, and persistence. In each AAA was observed a positive development of the subject in regards to interaction with friends, with other daily situations at the day care, and the reduction on both aggressiveness actions and isolation habits. AAA has shown to be a facilitator on the social interaction of the subject by promoting the subject's control over his stigmatized condition before the group.

Keywords: *Animal Assisted Therapy; Communication; Interpersonal Relations.*

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Resumo

As Intervenções Assistidas por Animais englobam Atividade, Educação e Terapia Assistida por Animais (A/E/TAA). A AAA define-se como interações informais por meio de visitas realizadas em instituições de saúde e educação, com fins motivacionais, educacionais e recreativos. A AAA foi introduzida na rotina de uma creche-escola utilizando cães. O sujeito, do gênero masculino, 11 anos de idade, fez parte de um grupo de cinco crianças selecionadas pela diretora pedagógica. A queixa era de agressividade, hiperatividade, os comportamentos frequentes de isolamento, brigas corporais e recusa em participar de atividades em grupo. Foram propostas atividades motivacionais sobre concentração, paciência e persistência. A cada AAA, observou-se a evolução positiva do sujeito na interação com os colegas, nas demais situações cotidianas na creche, redução das condutas agressivas e de isolamento habituais. Pontua-se a AAA como um facilitador da interação social dessa criança, promovendo a superação da condição estigmatizada diante do grupo.

Palavras-chave: Terapia Assistida por Animais; Comunicação; Relações Interpessoais.

Resumen

Las Intervenciones Asistidas por Animales incluyen Actividad, Educación y Terapia Asistida por Animales (A/E/TAA). AAA se define como interacciones informales a través de visitas en las instituciones de salud y educación, con propósitos de motivación, educación y recreativas. Fue introducido actividad con perros en la rutina de un jardín de infancia. El sujeto, sexo masculino, de 11 años, fue parte de un grupo de cinco niños seleccionados por el director pedagógico. La queja fue la agresión, hiperactividad, conductas frecuentes de aislamiento, peleas físicas y la negativa a participar en actividades de grupo. Se propuso actividades de motivación sobre la concentración, la paciencia y la persistencia. A cada sesión de AAA, hubo una evolución positiva del sujeto en interacción con colegas en otras situaciones cotidianas en las guarderías, la reducción del comportamiento agresivo y el aislamiento habitual. Señalamos la AAA como facilitador de la interacción social infantil, promover la superación de la condición estigmatizada en el grupo.

Palabras clave: Terapia Asistida por Animales; comunicación; relaciones interpersonales.

Introduction

For some decades now, in countries such as the United States, Canada and France, animals have been used for therapeutic purposes to assist in the treatment of human beings, and there has been a growing interest in Animal-Assisted Intervention (AAI), which encompass Animal-Assisted Activity, Education and Therapy (AAA, AAE and AAT)¹. In Brazil, the pioneer in this field was psychiatrist Nise da Silveira, who observed the therapeutic benefits of the interaction between psychiatric patients

and animals in the 50's in Rio de Janeiro's Pedro II hospital².

Animal-Assisted Activity (AAA) is defined as the informal interactions between patients and animals by means of visits to health and education institutions for motivational, educational and recreational purposes¹.

Several published studies point to the beneficial effects of this approach, which include: reducing anxiety³; improving the way patients face their illnesses⁴; facilitating the development of emotional bonds, socialization, communication, learning and physical development⁵; promoting the development/strengthening of emotional bonds, permeated by dialogue⁶; reducing the sensation of pain among hospitalized children and teenagers⁷; improving patients' quality of life and overall well-being⁸, among others.

Animal-assisted interventions – especially those involving dogs, due to their sociability, easy

1 The AAA, AAE and AAT referred to in the text follow those of the IAHAIO (International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations), an American association centered on the analysis of human-animal interaction through practice, research and education, in addition to training the animals involved in these different types of intervention.



training and wide acceptance by people^{9,10} – have been showing positive results in diverse environments, as the dog's presence may encourage positive feelings, exchange of affection and a sensation of comfort and well-being². Research conducted in fields such as Medicine, Nursing, Speech-Language Pathology, Psychology and Education confirm the physical, psychological and social benefits obtained by the patients who receive this type of intervention¹¹.

Despite the growing scientific investment in this field, studies/publications are still scarce. The present case report aims at describing the effects of AAA on a child with difficulties communicating and interacting in the school environment.

Case study

The study followed the recommendations of Resolution 196/96 of the National Health Council of the Ministry of Health, and was approved by the Ethics and Research Committee of the institution where it was conducted (CAEE 31880314.4.0000.5482/2014). A Parental/Guardian Informed Consent Form was signed by the child's legal guardian.

The AAA was introduced in 2012 into the routine of the day-care center/school² located in São Paulo through a partnership established with a Non-Governmental Organization³ that conducts this type of animal-assisted interventions. The data were collected in the second half of 2014 in eight 45-minute biweekly meetings with the presence of two to four dogs (of varying sizes and breeds) conducted by their trainers. The children participating in the intervention spent the mornings in the institution, then had lunch and went to school.

Five children were selected by the pedagogical director to take part in the AAA process. Even though all the children took active part in the AAA sessions, this study will focus specifically on one of the participants, a boy of 11 years of age, chosen due to some particular complaints, such as aggres-

sive behavior, hyperactivity and a short attention span when participating in school activities. He was also frequently isolated, refused to participate in group activities, and got involved in physical fights. The psychodiagnosis – conducted in the first half of 2014 by a school-clinic – pointed to a delay in his learning process.

In addition to these difficulties, from the very first AAA session it became clear that the boy's speech was immature for his age, as he omitted the /r/ in consonant clusters (for example, pronouncing the Portuguese word “*brinquedo*” as “*binquedo*”). He could not express his wishes or dissatisfactions verbally, and consequently was rejected – and stigmatized – by his peers.

During the first meeting the children were told all about the AAA procedures and that the process would last for eight meetings. When the dogs were introduced to the group, the subject of this study identified instantly with one of them (Nina, a small poodle), but still refused to take part in group activities, demonstrating his annoyance in having to share Nina with his peers.

The therapists proposed motivational activities focusing on concentration, patience and persistence, such as: giving obedience commands and teaching the dogs new commands, playing with obstacles, interacting with other dogs and cooperating with peers.

Little by little, the subject became more cooperative, as Nina started to obey his commands. Proud of his achievement, he began to teach his peers to do the same, which led to new (and unprecedented) forms of interaction with the group, as in the case of one particular AAA session, in which he spent the entire time teaching one of the group members how to hold the leash and give commands to Nina.

During this process, one exemplary situation is worth mentioning: the therapists proposed an activity consisting of “hiding snacks” so that the dogs could find them through their sense of smell. The subject promptly took the lead in conducting the game, and his leadership was well accepted by his peers. Within that specific context, his speech took on a different intonation from his usual childish speech, as his disability was suppressed (he began to pronounce the /r/ sounds). He also expressed significant emotional content (feelings and opinions).

Desirable changes were also observed in his interaction with the dogs (particularly with Nina),

2 Its mission is: to prepare, through an inclusive educational process, children and teenagers for the full exercise of their citizenship, reducing the social risk to which they are exposed by providing treatment, social promotion and the establishment of community support networks that include their families

3 Its goal is: to promote the health and quality of life of persons in vulnerable positions by means of Animal-Assisted Intervention.



mainly regarding the physical aspect: he started to hold the snacks that he had previously considered “smelly” and to carry them without fearing they would get their clothes dirty and having to wash his hands immediately afterwards.

Because of these improvements, in each AAA session the subject also improved his interaction with his peers, which was also seen in the regular, day-to-day interactions at the day-care center (as per information provided by the institution itself), especially in regard to his usual aggressive behavior and isolation.

At the last AAA session, the children were asked to sit in a circle to share their thoughts about the experience and say goodbye to the dogs and their trainers. All the children emphasized how much they had enjoyed the meetings, and the subject of this study surprised everybody by saying that he had gotten a dog and had named her after Nina, his friend.

Discussion

We may conclude that AAA was a facilitator of this child’s social interaction, increasing his self-esteem and allowing him to overcome his stigmatized condition before the rest of the group. These findings corroborate the literature, which points to an improvement in communicative behavior in the dog’s presence, as the animal acts as a catalyst to the subject’s motivations, by generating an environment of unconditional acceptance of his or her discourse, and, therefore, favorable to the dialogue^{12,6}.

Research also suggests that AAA may increase the subjects’ attention/concentration skills and social interaction, which are desirable in group dynamics¹³.

Additionally, the reduction in aggressive behaviors and the improvement in the subject’s interaction with his or her peers go in line with studies that confirm the dog’s presence as a fundamental element to promote emotional balance and increase positive attitudes toward the school environment among children with psychological disorders¹⁴. In this sense, dogs may be considered a calming agent, given that during the AAA process there was a change in the sociability, mood swings and overall behavior of the subject of this study, with a decrease in episodes of arguments and fights¹⁵. The affection and tenderness awaken in the subject by

the dog that interacted with him during the AAA sessions were demonstrated by his spontaneous patting, kissing and saying affectionate words to Nina, and culminated with his naming his new dog after her, an homage that showed the importance of these feelings as a memory he would carry with him through his life¹⁵.

Conclusion

We may point to AAA as a facilitator of social interaction, as it helped improve our subject’s communicative behaviors. Therefore, we expect that this study will contribute and encourage the active scientific literature in this field, given that the AAA’s beneficial effects on communication and social interaction presented here point to the relevance of research that investigates the effectiveness of this type of therapy within the school environment.

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