

Utilizing Animal Assisted Interventions in Elementary Schools

by

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Abstract

Animal Assisted Interventions in the elementary school counseling setting involves the school counselor choosing to bring in an animal, commonly a dog, to assist in counseling interventions with a student. The counselor uses the dog as a tool to build a secure and trusting rapport with the student. The counselor is the facilitator of the session; the dog is used in a variety of ways to increase and aide in the benefits of the counseling session. This project illustrates the positive impact of the human-animal bond, the steps necessary to bring animal assisted interventions into a school, and the theoretical base that supports animal assisted interventions. This information is also presented as a website to be easily accessible for counselors, parents, and educators.

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### Utilizing Animal Assisted Interventions in Elementary Schools

Elementary school counselors adhere to the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) National Model (2013a) when considering an individualized appropriate delivery system for their responsibilities as a school counselor. The ASCA outlines that school counselors serve students, staff members, parents, and community members in five areas. These five areas include (1) direct student services, (2) school counseling core curriculum, (3) individual student planning, (4) responsive services, and (5) indirect student services (ASCA, 2013a). These service areas create a concrete pathway for counselors while still allowing creativity when implementing the services. Research on using animals in the school counseling atmosphere defines both benefits and considerations for school counselors who choose to utilize animal assisted interventions when implementing counseling services (Nebbe, 1991).

Research dating back to the 1700's illustrates the many ways animals are used in the counseling and mental health professions. In 1792, animals such as rabbits and poultry were used in an insane asylum in England to emphasize the natural surroundings of a living environment (Trivedi & Perl, 1995). The first documented use of animal facilitated counseling in the United States was in 1942 when a military soldier requested a dog to accompany him as he recovered from battle wounds, which ultimately led to other patients benefiting from animal assisted counseling. In 1953, Boris Levinson, a child psychologist, brought his pet dog Jingles to a therapy session and witnessed an eight year old uncommunicative patient interact with Jingles and in turn helped Levinson break through barriers to best treat this client and many more in the future (Trivedi & Perl, 1995).

As decades pass, researchers discover new innovative ways to implement and deliver counseling sessions with clients of all ages. Each counseling client is unique and has their own barriers, troubles, and triumphs that counselors need to be able to adapt to confidently and effectively. Historically, theories and techniques are revised to meet the needs of the clients. Currently, counselors across the world are still challenged to creatively reach their clients' needs, which can be difficult particularly concerning funding, time constraints, and rapport. Fortunately, mental health professionals such as Boris Levinson, often referred to as the pioneer of animal assisted therapy, researched the benefits of using animals in the work place to benefit the counseling experience and many of these techniques can be implemented in the elementary school setting (Friesen, 2010).

The purpose of this research project is to answer the following question: What are the benefits and precautions of elementary school counselors using dogs to facilitate their counseling programs? The research obtained will then be presented to inform teachers, counselors, and administrators of the benefits, procedures, and techniques of using animals, specifically dogs, as a tool in the elementary school counseling profession.

Although the benefits of animal assisted counseling are in abundance, there are precautions to consider (Nebbe, 1991). These precautions, benefits, and considerations will be clearly outlined in this project to create a concise program overview for schools or school counselors. School counselors may use this project when researching the pros and cons of including a pet in the school-counseling program. School counselors may also use this project to help explain the costs, benefits, precautions, and considerations to school administrators when seeking approval for allowing animals in the counseling program.

**Defining Terminology**

Throughout the years researchers have studied the effects animals have on patients and clients in the mental health setting, but new terminology is coined as new findings surface in the field. Earlier data shows that pets originally used in therapy were simply coincidental. Many therapists reported observing an animal in the daily surroundings having a positive effect on their client (Levinson, 1965). From the mid-twentieth century, Boris Levinson began formally addressing animals in the mental health field as pet therapy and pet psychotherapy (Parshall, 2003). Consequently, as other researchers continued investigating the results of bringing animals into the counseling setting, the terms pet-facilitated psychotherapy, pet facilitated therapy, four-footed therapy, animal assisted therapy, co-therapy with an animal, animal facilitated counseling (Parshall, 2003), animal assisted activities, and animal assisted interventions have all been used (Walsh, 2009a).

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is a commonly used term in the mental health setting as it is an overarching phrase to describe several ways in which people of all ages received mental health counseling that involves an animal to some degree (Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2011). The word therapy is incorporated in this terminology because therapy involves the client and therapist working together to reach a goal or improvement within the client. When the pet is introduced to the client, the therapist is able to decide to what degree he will use the animal in the counseling session. The pet could be used as a co-therapist or therapy facilitator or as a tool or outlet to reach the client with the animal being referred to as the therapist's pet (Zilcha-Mano, et al., 2011). In both of these circumstances, the animal is still acting as an adjunct to the treatment (Reichert, 1998).

The term Animal Facilitated Counseling (AFC) is used in several articles to describe counselors who use animals within their framework with a client as it is often observed that the dog truly facilitates a child's growth in counseling sessions (Trivedi, & Perl, 1995). According to Pet Partners (formerly Delta Society) (2012a), their preferred terminology is Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA). On the Pet Partners website, they provide a detailed description of what defines AAA and how it differs from AAT. Specifically, AAA is a casual "meet and greet" activity with no specific goal or treatment planned, and the visits are often spontaneous. AAT occurs on a regularly scheduled basis and used as a tool to reach the client's goals during their treatment for a physical, social, emotional, or cognitive challenge (Pet Partners, 2012a).

Although school counselors often help students reach a specified goal, school counselors often do not refer to any use of animal as therapy in order to be in line with ASCA standards. ASCA's website (2013b) includes a list of activities that are appropriate and inappropriate for a school counselor to do. Under the inappropriate list, ASCA states that counselors should not be "providing therapy or long-term counseling in school to address psychological disorders" (ASCA, 2013b, Inappropriate Activities, bullet 12). Instead of referring to AAT, Jennifer VonLintel, suggested counselors in the school systems utilize the terminology of Animal Assisted Interventions. VonLintel is an elementary school counselor in Loveland, Colorado. She began researching and working with animals in the counseling field in 2009 when she partnered with Colorado State University and Human Animal Bond in Colorado (HABIC) during a graduate level research project. Once VonLintel witnessed the benefits of animals in counseling settings, she began searching for more information for obtaining a dog, certifying him, and bringing him into school with her. VonLintel now brings her own dog, Copper, into the elementary school on a routine basis. VonLintel realized the lack of readily available

information for counselors regarding the benefits, practices, and procedures for bringing animals into school settings, which led her to create her own website to provide resources for others. VonLintel refers to her practice as Therapy and Facility Dogs, and also branched out into implementing reading programs and other animal assisted activities in the school. In the school setting, interventions are put in place to help a child succeed a given goal often set forth by a committee of school personnel, the student, and/or the parents. Using the term intervention portrays the accurate role of the dog being used in the counseling setting. For the purpose of this paper, the term Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) will be used as it appropriately addresses the scope of a school counselor's role. Furthermore, the animal that is referred to in AAI, unless otherwise stated, will be a dog, specifically the personal pet of the school counselor.

### **Description of Need**

School counselor Laurie Burton (1995) recalls a sixth grade student who received little human affection in his life. This child learned to act in ways that would keep people distant from him. When the counselor observed the child enter into counseling sessions he was flat in emotion, and did not readily interact with people. When the counselor began bringing in her dog, Blaze, she was able to observe the student enter the room unhappy, then lighten up throughout his session as he interacted with the dog, even training it to do basic commands. Burton believes the student's sense of control increased his self esteem.

Similarly, Burton (1995) was able to use Blaze in one on one counseling lessons to make children comfortable as they were allowed to pet the dog, bury their face in his fur, cry on him, and play with him. Burton was also able to personify the dog as she related actions the children took towards the dog to actions they take with other children and adults. Additionally, the dog was used in guidance counseling classroom lessons. Topics such as responsibility, basic needs,



and kindness were taught with the dog's presence as a tool in the education. These examples are just a few instances where the needs of the students were met with the use of AAI (Burton, 1995).

In the classroom setting, many teachers are hard pressed to provide interventions for students exhibiting challenging behaviors (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011). Fortunately, a 1999 study at Colorado State University (Parshall, 2003) observed two children during an 11-14 week span. During this study, animal assisted interventions were used. The children were able to spend the first 10-20 minutes building a rapport with the dog while they discussed their experiences of the week. For the next 40 minutes, the children trained the dog for a demonstration to the class. When the study concluded, the researchers observed the children exhibiting more confidence, greater ability to pay attention in class, less hyperactivity, an increase in social skills, and less oppositional behavior than before the sessions began (Parshall, 2003). Elementary school counselors are often faced with designing interventions to lessen common distracting behaviors that exist within classrooms including, but not limited to, children with hyperactivity, children having a lack of focus in the classroom, poor communication skills, acting out in response to all forms of abuse, grief, or loss. Although school counselors do not treat elementary children specifically for substance abuse, animals have been incorporated into drug prevention curriculum outside of the school setting, in private or community counseling. (Minatrea, & Wesley, 2008). Counselors can increase their counseling skill set by using different intervention techniques, and this project will provide the information necessary to properly begin a counseling program that involves animal assisted counseling.

Part of the ASCA National Model includes personal and social development (ASCA, 2013a). Responsibility is an ongoing developmental progression that children, especially

students, experience in many ways. Animal assisted counseling can be used to further enhance the lessons surrounding responsibility. Pet care can be broken into many different skill sets and domains to increase a student's reliability, encourage cleanliness, establish routine, and learn safe and appropriate hygiene practices (Flom, 2005).

AAI is a technique in which skills such as self-calming and impulse control can be taught (Flom, 2005). According to Flom (2005) animals, even "pocket pets," which include hamsters, gerbils, and guinea pigs, can be used in AAI to teach these skills as they respond to disruptions in their environment. Sudden movements, loud noises, and disruptive noisy behaviors are common in elementary school environments. These animals can demonstrate visually the effects of disruptive behaviors. While stroking an animal, children often are able to regain control and are able to focus on the classroom tasks. Flom personally observed animals, such as pocket pets, effectively contributing to calmness and focus in children who usually experience difficulties in sitting still.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Many theoretical approaches can be applied to animal assisted interventions. Person-centered counseling is the first theoretical underpinning that will be addressed for AAI. Person-centered counseling focuses on the nondirective approaches a counselor uses to ultimately increase self-acceptance within the client. The counselor often reflects on a client's verbal and nonverbal communication to promote self-exploration. Chandler, Portrie-Bethke, Barrio Minton, Fernando, and O'Callaghan (2010) state,

Person-centered counselors do not manage or direct a session; nor do they take responsibility for the client. Rather, they help clients to feel safe and open by being congruent, authentic, genuine, caring, accepting, warm, and empathetic. With this

counseling experience, referred to as unconditional positive regard, clients increasingly trust themselves and move toward becoming more self-actualized. (p. 358)

Carl Roger's client-centered therapy follows this framework by allowing the animal's interactions with the student to be naturally full of unconditional positive regard. Rogers (1961) defines unconditional positive regard as accepting "fully and freely and without fear the positive feelings of another" (p. 81). Rogers continues this way of counseling by detailing the transition of positive regard between the client and the counselor. The client often enters into the counseling relationship unable to fully accept positive regard from the counselor. As the counselor accepts and respects the client, he is also able to identify the deep struggles of the client, thus experiencing an underlying commonality. Rogers expresses that when the counselor establishes these positive feelings of acceptance and respect, the client is then able to accept the inevitable reaction, which is to relax, and reduce tension as the client explores the struggles of their life throughout the counseling experience. When the counselor witnesses the animal's natural unconditional positive regard for the child, the counselor can emphasize the fact that the animal likes the child which often creates a positive relationship between the child and animal and lifts the child's demeanor (Trivedi & Perl, 1995).

Animals are often used in the counseling sessions spontaneously. Their presence in the room is enough to bring forth feelings of warmth and rapport between the counselor and the student. These feelings quicken the therapeutic process as the counselor is able to observe the child while they are verbally and/or nonverbally interacting with the dog and the counselor. The child is likely filled with positive emotions while interacting with the animals, which can encourage productive conversations and therapeutic growth (Trivedi & Perl, 1995).

Zilcha-Mano et al. (2011) researched the attachment perspective on Animal-Assisted Therapy. To review, their terminology is different than what is used within this paper, they define AAT as an

Umbrella term for diverse therapeutic approaches, used with people of all ages (from children to the elderly), in which an animal is an integral part of the treatment process.

AAT involves interactions in the therapy room between a client, an animal (usually a dog), and a therapist, with the aim of improving therapeutic outcomes. (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011, p. 541)

Attachment theorists believe attachment orientations are formed during early childhood. If an attachment figure is present during the child's times of need, they are fostering attachment security, self-worth, adaptive emotion-regulation strategies, effective psychological functioning, and favorable mental health (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). Recently, researchers have investigated attachment theory in regards to non-human figures including God, places, inanimate objects, and animals. There are four pieces that complete the attachment bond puzzle; proximity seeking, safe haven, secure base, and separation distress. Research indicates that pets meet these specifications as most pet owners report feeling an emotional closeness to their pets, enjoy being close to their pets, feel their pets are a safe haven, and their pets provide support, comfort, and relief during times of distress (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011).

In the therapeutic mindset, Zilcha-Mano et al. (2011) explored Boris Levinson's comparison of animal and human relationships. Levinson suggested interpersonal relationships are often developed from hopes, aspirations, and disappointments where as animal-human relationships are usually less complicated, more predictable and consistent. Additionally, pets are frequently viewed as a secure base, and owners report feeling unconditional love and show

no signs of abandoning the owner. These facts tie back into both the attachment theory and Carl Roger's child-centered therapy as they go hand in hand with unconditional positive regard.

There are two negative attachment perspectives: avoidant and anxiously attached. A client who is avoidant often turns away from forming new relationships and distances themselves from others as they often self-rely, and do not appropriately release their concerns (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). However, when this same client is working with an animal in the therapeutic process, the clients are often observed forming a positive bond with the dog as the pet accepts and responds positively to the client. This in turn creates feelings of adequacy and control for the client, reaffirming feelings of nurturing, dependence, and security, which can be safe (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011).

Anxiously attached clients often exhibit overdependence with another individual. The client is usually in need of more attention, affirmation, affection, and support from an individual, often as the result of experiencing an unreliable or insufficiently responsive attachment figure during their early childhood (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). When utilizing animal assisted interventions, clients are able to gain stability through the consistent presence of the animal, and the counselor. The dog is viewed as being emotionally stable, predictable, submissive, and secure. Previously, clients would be preoccupied trying to gauge interpersonal relationships, which can be unpredictable as humans often say one thing, yet act another way. Humans are often harder to "read" as well, whereas the dog readily awaits the client, greets them with kisses, a tail wagging, and is consistent in this behavior throughout their counseling sessions. This stability can free up the client's mind to do self-exploration as anxiety about an unpredictable relationship is diminished (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011).

School counselors must manage their time allotments with each student. School counseling schedules include life skill lessons, school duties, testing obligations, individual counseling, and group counseling, which is all dependent upon students' and teachers' schedules and obligations (ASCA, 2013a). Therefore, school counselors are in need of finding tools to reach students in the most effective ways possible. Therapeutic relationships take time to build. When counselors use animal assisted therapy, they have the ability to manage their time effectively while providing therapeutic advancements for the students. Linda Lloyd Nebbe (1991), describes the experience of using animals in her school counseling sessions as a way to more rapidly build rapport between her and the student (Nebbe, 1991). By sharing a special interest such as the animal, their bond is strengthened as the child trusts and respects the counselor.

School counselors are educated and trained to help students socially, emotionally, and academically (ASCA, 2013a). Elementary school aged children (5-12) are developing in many ways that influence their daily functioning while at school, fortunately, school counselors are often able to guide and teach children life skills, coping skills, confidence, values, and help the children achieve their goals. One aspect of understanding a client is to understand their attachment style. Animals bring about a unique perspective on attachment that counselors can utilize in the school setting as they relate key characteristics and functions that both animals and humans have in common (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). Recent studies have shown that animals have reduced the feelings of loneliness in people and provide social support. Although observations and self-reports have identified the benefits of animals on human attachment, scientists have found that when a person is petting or interacting with an animal the human brain can trigger the production of oxytocin, a pleasure and stress-reducing hormone (Sable, 2013).

Additionally, when secure attachments are built between the animals and the student, the student is then able to relate to and build a secure relationship with the counselor. Finally, counselors can follow the lead of the naturally playful child and dog as it is often hard for adults to dive into a playful context (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011).

Choice theorist, William Glasser, states that human relationships are difficult to solve, but surprisingly easy to understand. In choice theory, Glasser emphasizes that one must understand and accept that you can only control your own behavior, and no one else's (Glasser, 1997). Combining choice theory and animal assisted interventions, school counselors can teach responsibility and respect while guiding the student and animal's interactions (Trivedi & Perl, 1995). Glasser (1997) describes the four needs of choice theory as the need to belong, to have power, to have freedom, and to have fun. At birth each individual identifies how these needs will be reached to create their own unique quality world. Individuals then act in ways that will lead to the fulfillment of each need to create a quality world.

Reality therapy is the style of therapy commonly used with Choice Theory. To demonstrate how animal assisted interventions can be used in Reality Therapy (RT), there are a few common questions that are asked that can be tailored when used with AAI; "What do you want?" and "What are you doing to get what you want?" Minatrea and Wesley (2008) followed a counselor and her dog Mitzi Ann, who was trained to do tricks during the RT counseling sessions. The clients were asked what they want the dog to do, and how are they going to get her to do it? The clients are then challenged to complete various tasks with Mitzi Ann, both verbally and nonverbally. This approach is just one example of how animals can be used within RT; in this case the dog was used as a metaphor in a very realistic manner.

Although this example is extremely specific and took planning to accomplish, Minatrea and Wesley (2008) state that animal assisted interventions are more about spontaneous teachable moments. The dog can be spoken to when describing feelings, actions of affection, sensitivity to changes in a person's voice, and the dog can even be used to explain manners/polite acts such as getting a tissue when someone sneezes (Minatrea & Wesley, 2008). Lastly, to reaffirm the use of a dog within the school counseling setting, Minatrea and Wesley (2008) emphasize that AAI can aide in augmenting a counselor's counseling theory, increase both verbal and non-verbal communication, and provide a concrete method to teach problem solving techniques to the students.

### **Different Animals, Different Populations**

Animal assisted interventions can be used with an assortment of populations. Research has shown that animals can effectively be used as tools in the counseling relationship when teaching skills such as responsibility, impulse control, and attachment (Flom, 2005), building respect, peace, tranquility and trust (Nebbe, 1991), dealing with death (Trivedi & Perl, 1995), reducing the effects of and coping with shy and unresponsive clients, managing or reducing anxiety (Friesen, 2010), increasing a client's well-being, decreasing stress, and even counseling a sexually abused client (Parshall, 2003). Counselors can choose the amount of involvement for the animals and this allows for flexibility and creativity.

Bringing animals into the school counseling profession is a relatively new phenomenon, and it is constantly gaining research and evidence in the mental health field. However, bringing animals into the mental health field is *not* new, and is done in a variety of ways. There is a specialty referred to as canine crisis intervention, which is when counselors bring dogs in during the aftermath of a crisis, such as a mass shooting at a school (or university) setting (Flom, 2005).



These dogs are believed to provide comfort for people in times of distress. Other animals that can be used in the counseling session are tropical fish, as they can bring a sense of comfort to the counseling office, which otherwise could arise anxiety as the client enters an unfamiliar setting. As previously mentioned, smaller animals such as hamsters, gerbils, and guinea pigs have been used in elementary school counseling programs as an intervention to help build rapport, build a strong counseling relationship, and progress the counseling goals (Flom, 2005). Flom (2005) mentions applicable lessons that stem from having a pocket pet present in the counseling setting, which include lessons about feelings, self-control, responsibility, grief, and attachment. When the animals are present, the applicability is easily accessible for children, as the feelings are in the moment. Petting pocket pets, as well as dogs and a variety of other animals, elicits calming and reassuring feelings when clients are exploring challenging topics that bring forth angst and threatening issues (Walsh, 2009b).

There are numerous theoretical foundations that support bringing in Animal Assisted Interventions in the school counseling practice. AAI fosters the rapport between the counselor and the student, and reduces stress during the counseling sessions. The bond that occurs between a child and an animal is often natural and in turn allows for the positive benefits of AAI to flourish as indicated in the research and theoretical underpinnings.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review reveals positive benefits and realistic precautions while using Animal Assisted Interventions. The human-animal bond dates back into ancient times, and creates a thorough foundation for future studies in different settings such as schools. Next, AAI within the elementary school setting is explored including common activities that include the use of the animal, concerns that often arise when bringing an animal into a school, and the

considerations for counselors. Lastly, necessary training and practical operations are discussed to develop a successful AAI program in an elementary school counseling setting.

### **Human-Animal Bonds 1: The Relational Significance of Companion Animals**

Recent research confirms the positive effects animals can have on humans including physiological, psychological, and social benefits (Walsh, 2009a). However, there is little research in the mental health field regarding the significance of the human-animal bond. Dr. Froma (as cited in Walsh, 2009a) gathered information dating the human-animal bond back into ancient times when many traditions included the worship and honor of the relationships between people and animals as a link from the natural world to the spirit world. Chinese culture believes each person is born with characteristics of the animal on the Chinese calendar of the month and year of a person's birth. In addition, Walsh incorporates ancient folklore that includes mystical animals such as those that are part-lion and part-canine. In Egypt, both cats and dogs have been honored for centuries. Cats were even worshipped with the goddess Bastet, and dogs were considered to be loyal companions in the living life, and acted as guides during the afterlife.

When considering archeological proof, evidence reveals that people and domestic wolves lived in harmony over 14,000 years ago. Canines were valued for their intelligence, keen senses, and loyalty (Walsh, 2009a). Approximately 9,000 years ago, both dogs and cats played a vital role in agricultural communities as dogs were herding and assisting in farming, and cats were instinctively killing diseased rodents. These animals might have begun as servants to the humans, but became companions as time ensued (Walsh, 2009a).

Furthermore, Walsh (2009a) continues dating back the history of the human-animal bond into ancient Greek and Roman empires. During these times, dogs acted as hunters, herders, and guardians while simultaneously considered to be loyal and beloved pets. The graves (sometimes

canine and human remains were buried together) and wording of epithets indicate the significance of the human-animal bond (Walsh, 2009a). The burial of humans with animals can also be found in Peru, as many burial sites of humans also included a dog buried nearby with a blanket and food.

Not only were animals viewed over the centuries as having a spiritual connection, but animals also serve as a prized possession of rulers and aristocracy (Walsh, 2009a). In some cases, animals were even given their own servants and lap dogs grew popular as they were known as “comforters.” Dogs were also prevalent in royal traditions in China and Europe, and still are to a degree.

Currently, approximately 63% of United States households have companion animals, and over 75% of households that have children also have a pet. In the United States, dogs are the most common pets, followed by cats, then birds (Walsh, 2009a). Contemporary pet owners often pamper their pets, giving them treats, presents, social media attention, and include their pets in their daily living activities. In the last 30 years, research has correlated pet ownership with health benefits and revealed the pet owners were found to have lower blood pressure, serum triglycerides, and cholesterol levels (Walsh, 2009a). Walsh (2009a) included several similar studies in his article, “Human-Animal Bonds I: The Relational Significance of Companion Animals” that can be read in further indicating other positive benefits of pet ownership for an individuals well-being including impacts on chronic conditions, illnesses, cancer, developmental disabilities, and psychological disabilities.

Specifically regarding dogs, which is the focus animal of the animal assisted interventions in the school-counseling field, biological anthropologists have concluded that dogs have “complex thinking and feelings and have acute sensory perception” (Walsh, 2009a, p. 468).

Dogs are also able to read human cues and behavior including glances and subtle hand gestures, indicating that although dogs cannot speak verbally, they are able to understand and communicate with humans in other ways.

Animals can play a vital role in child development. Animals are present in a child's life in a variety of ways including as pets, symbolic animals, fantasy animals, stuffed animals, and animals in stories/books (Walsh, 2009a). Walsh (2009a) includes many popular children's books and fairy tales, making the presence of animals in a child's life very frequent. Children are able to relate to animal characters, both fictional and those in real life, as many stories include lessons about life, love, and loss (Walsh, 2009a). Animals also affect child development as children often consider animals to be their peers, and often learn to read a dog's body language. Walsh (2009a) summarizes a study indicating that some professionals find it easier to teach children to be empathetic with an animal rather than with a human because of the dog's straight forward, clear, expression of his feelings and behaviors. This concept serves as a steppingstone for children to have high confidence, better moods, and greater empathy with humans.

Counselors often see child clients whose lives are comprised because of neglect, feelings of untrustworthiness, and/or abuse within human relationships. Walsh (2009a) includes several instances where pets (specifically dogs) help these clients overcome their troubled pasts. He states that these clients often form a strong bond with their pets as the animals meet the human needs of physical, emotional, and social contact while reducing or eliminating the fear that often exists within their home lives with humans. Other times counselors experience clients who find a new meaning in their lives through their pets. One example is a client who had suicidal ideations, but reported to his counselor that he could not carry out the suicide because he would abandon his pets (Walsh, 2009a). One of Walsh's own clients fell into a depressive lifestyle as

he slept all day, became disconnected with any human relationships, and lost his job. Halfway through therapy, this client bought a puppy, and with this responsibility of being a pet owner he found motivation to get out of bed in the morning, to function in order to take care of the dog, to socialize at dog parks, and eventually became an interactive pet owner at a dog park where he met his future wife. Walsh summarizes these experiences as examples of how strong and important the human-animal bond can be.

Lastly, Walsh (2009a) includes an entire section of this article dedicated to Animal-Assisted Interventions. Walsh mentions the use of animal-assisted programs in countries such as Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. Settings can include schools, residential treatment centers, and prisons, with an even wider range of activities being utilized within each setting. Not only are counselors using animals to assist in interventions for their clients, but animals are also being used in programs that promote reading in children. Studies show reading to a pet (who is nonjudgmental) helps reduce shyness, anxiety, learning difficulties, and classroom embarrassment while reading. In other programs, animals are being used to aide in the recovery of people suffering from physical, cognitive, emotional, or social challenges, wounded veterans, and children with autism (Walsh, 2009a).

Many of these mentioned programs are in the younger stages of research, but are already showing success around the globe. Clients in residential settings are learning to take responsibility for the care of animals, they are able to experience empathy and nonthreatening affection, they promote prosocial behaviors, increase calm feelings, and increase focus for students with attention-deficit disorder and other learning disabilities in the public school systems (Walsh, 2009a). Walsh reiterates the importance of continuing research within animal

assisted interventions as there are already proven client benefits such as increased physiological, psychological, and relational well-being. Walsh (2009a) states,

Fundamentally, humans are relational beings. Companion animals, although not for everyone, can meet many core psychosocial needs and enrich our lives. They provide pleasure and relaxation; deep affection and steadfast loyalty; and security and constancy in our changing lives. These attachments bring joy and comfort to children and adults and contribute to healthier, happier, and even longer lives. Bonds with companion animals may not be our whole lives, but they can make our lives whole. (Walsh, 2009a, p. 476)

### **Exploring Animal-Assisted Programs with Children in School and Therapeutic Contexts**

Lori Friesen (2010) communicates the urge to find innovative programs that are varied and creative to help children learn in today's society. Friesen explores the research that encourages bringing AAI into the school-counseling field. First, Friesen begins with the pioneer of AAI, Boris Levinson. To recap, Boris Levinson began bringing his dog into counseling sessions in the late 1960s and 1970s. Upon observing the interactions between the client and the dog, Levinson referred to the dog as a 'social lubricant' between the child client and himself, the therapist (Friesen, 2010). The dog was able to create a more relaxed atmosphere in the counseling setting, which ultimately lead to greater levels of self-disclosure for the client. Following these initial findings, researchers began actively collecting data on the psychological and physiological effects animals have on humans in the home, in therapeutic settings, in classrooms, hospitals, and in special-needs environments.

Friesen (2010) found that within the elementary school setting, researchers observed dogs improving the lives of children in many ways. The dog's presence increases the overall

emotional stability for elementary school students, lowers behavioral, emotional, and verbal distress, increases students' positive attitudes towards schools, and promotes self-esteem. Lastly, dogs in the school classroom increase students' attentiveness, responsiveness, and cooperation with an adult (Friesen, 2010). In this unique relationship between the child and the dog, the child enters the relationship as the nurturing figure, and is accepted without judgment. However, with all of the benefits of AAI, criticisms do exist, and Friesen (2010) gives many suggestions to minimize potential challenges.

**Challenges.** First, many adults worry about allergies and cleanliness when a dog is brought into the school building. Possible resolutions include choosing a dog that is a minimal shedder, grooming them regularly, ensuring the dog is up to date on all vaccinations, and implementing hand sanitizer/proper hand washing techniques for the children before and after visiting with any animal (Friesen, 2010). Furthermore, if possible, classroom guidance lessons that have students with known allergies can be held outside to reduce any allergy aggravations. A second concern for many adults is safety for the children. The animal used in any AAI should be properly registered and evaluated by a trained individual to ensure the dog is appropriate for AAI, (see "Necessary Training" section). Children can learn how to respectfully approach and greet a dog through guidance lessons and regular interactions with the counselor and the dog. Additionally, students and adults who are fearful of dogs can be taught how to safely act around the dog. Friesen (2010) included being quiet, gentle, and playing fairly with the dog as crucial lessons that are taught in many AAI programs.

Counselors may also encounter cultural considerations when working with AAI. Some Middle Eastern or South-East Asian cultures view dogs as unclean and they discourage children from playing with them (Friesen, 2010). For this reason and many more, a consent form is

suggested to be sent home with the children before beginning any form of AAI to clearly outline the interactions that are to occur, safety precautions, and professional training of both the dog and the counselor to communicate the effectiveness and safety of AAI in the school setting (Friesen, 2010).

After attending conferences, researching, and observing animals interacting with special needs students in the school system, Friesen (2010) is confident in two facts regarding AAI. First and foremost, there is substantial evidence indicating animals have positive effects on children as they are non-judgmental, and provide social and emotional support. Second, there is little research in this new field of bringing animals into the classroom setting for general educators. However, there are a few distinctive features that exist in AAI with children.

In AAI, the animal is always under the control of the handler, such as the school counselor, therapist, doctor, owner, or trainer. The counselor chooses AAI as a supplemental intervention, and this is not a sole replacement for a human counselor (Friesen, 2010). The animal is likely to aide in the building of a healthy relationship between the counselor and the client, but is only used after the counselor carefully considers the appropriateness of using AAI with a particular child. Although research is still in the beginning stages of using AAI within elementary school settings, Friesen (2010) includes research studies that have used animals as an intervention in some capacity that yield positive results indicating the animals benefit a child's development. These studies include therapy dogs affect on the speed and accuracy of motor skills tasks in children, the aide in teaching daily living skills, and also in utilizing dogs as part of a curriculum such as reading, writing, story time, and circle time (Friesen, 2010). It is also noted that the presence of a dog can increase student participation, but can be disruptive to the children and teacher if the dog was present all day.



A common finding when using AAI is the growth and encouragement for children who are usually unwilling to actively engage in social interactions (Friesen, 2010). Additionally, research repeatedly finds that AAI provides a calming effect for the client, especially when the client is under stress. This finding of reduced anxiety and stress is suggested to be the reasoning for the willingness for children to engage socially when accompanied by a dog in AAI.

Within Friesen's (2010) concluding remarks, the importance of proper training of an animal and the handler is reiterated. An often-misguided assumption regarding AAI is that direct and verbal attention is crucial, but research indicates that the mere presence of an animal has many physiological benefits that require little to no guidance from the handler. During AAI, the child is able to experience the dog as a nurturing emotional support system, providing a non-judgmental intervention in the school setting (Friesen, 2010). In closing, Friesen (2010) introduced AAI in a variety of settings, for a variety of populations. AAI will need to be tailored to appropriately serve each client to meet their goals, but the yielding results of AAI are benefits to the client physiological, psychological, and emotional well being.

### **Necessary Training**

Each school district is entitled to set parameters regarding animals in the schools. A dog utilized within the counseling program would not be classified as a service dog, which is protected by federal laws for the disabled. Instead, counselors can provide their administrators with research, documentation, insurance information, appropriate training, and first hand experiences from students, staff, and parents when implementing this innovative practice.

Prior to seeking any choice training certification for the dog, school counselors first need to consult their school district to identify any specific trainings or certifications the district has

set in place. If there are no required or recommended courses, there are a few organizations that offer trainings that are applicable to dogs that will be in the school environment.

Therapy Dogs International is a volunteer organization committed to training, helping, regulating, and promoting therapy dogs in a variety of settings (Therapy Dogs International, 2014a). Although the dog is not directly providing therapy in the school setting, the purpose of this organization would be to provide resources and training. Therapy Dogs International (2014c) can provide educational information regarding dog safety. Additionally, it describes a new program, Children Reading to Dogs: Tail Waggin' Tutors (Therapy Dogs International, 2014c). This program is managed by Therapy Dogs International, but can be executed by handlers and their dogs, and is not reliant on the counselor to carry out day-to-day activities. Tail Waggin' Tutors is designed to encourage students with reading difficulties by providing them with a nonjudgmental companion. The dog lies next to the students and provides a calming effect while the child works on their reading skills. Not only does the dog provide a calm environment for the child, but also brings an excitement to reading, teaches the child about animals, and builds self-esteem. Therapy Dogs International provides an instructional DVD for schools implementing this program, and a principal that is interviewed shares his excitement of this program as he indicates that Tail Waggin' Tutors is not only a great opportunity for students, but also helped to raise reading scores (Therapy Dogs International, 2014b). Therapy Dogs International also provides an email address to contact them for more information regarding bringing a dog into the school setting.

Pet Partners is a non-profit organization that has multiple subprograms for service, therapy, and companion animals. Pet Partners promotes the health benefits for humans when they are with an animal. Pet Partners professes, "At the heart of all of Pet Partners' programs is

a research foundation which demonstrates that when animals are around, people's blood pressure goes down, stress and anxiety levels are reduced, people feel less lonely and less depressed, and they tend to be more social and community oriented" (Pet Partners, 2012a). On their website there are links directing the reader to research based articles supporting their claims and proving the positive effects animals can have on humans. They also provide links to match people up with pets, how to train your own dog to become a service, companion, or therapy animal, and there is also an online course for the handler to take. Lastly, there is an online directory on the Pet Partner page, which provides a search to identify all evaluators and instructors in each state. One possible route to provide a safe working relationship with animal assisted interventions in school counseling is for the counselor to successfully complete the handler course. Through Pet Partners, this course prepares both the handler and the animal for volunteer visits, identifies and decreases stresses with your animal, provides education on animal health and safety, identifies special needs of specific client groups, and explains how to interact with a dog with different types of people (Pet Partners, 2012b).

Two other informational websites for registering and training an animal to provide, or aide in a task to enrich the lives of others are K9 to 5 National Therapy Dog Registry, and Therapy Dogs United. All of the previously mentioned websites and organizations provide a few general recommendations when identifying dogs that would be appropriate to bring into a school setting to assist in counseling children. The minimum standards across the board include an educated handler, a veterinary's approval for the dog to work in public stating they are in excellent health condition, and for the dog to successfully pass a test by a nationally trained instructor to ensure the dog's temperament is suitable to assist in safely counseling children.

**Precautions**

Bringing a dog into the counseling setting is not appropriate for everyone, all the time. Counselors have provided scenarios and suggestions to enhance the animal assisted counseling experience, and researchers have set parameters to keep both animals and humans safe when they are working together. First, school counselor Jennifer VonLintel (personal communication, September 7, 2014) at B.F. Kitchen Elementary School in Colorado, speaks from first hand experience when taking precautions with a dog in the school building. VonLintel recommends having a healthy working relationship with the building principal to establish a routine for the dog. VonLintel has an agreement in her building that if possible, she will be notified before any fire alarm, drill, or mass gathering in her building so she can prepare a safe place for her dog.

In addition, VonLintel (2014) created an extra line in the parent release form for all students in individual counseling to inform parents of the opportunity for their child to work with the animal assisted intervention dog. VonLintel encouraged parents to speak with her with any questions or concerns. She also announced the animal assisted intervention plan to all the teachers in the building and gave them the opportunity to voice any of their concerns. One teacher in VonLintel's school has an agreement that VonLintel's dog, Copper, would not enter into her classroom but the teacher fully supports the animal assisted intervention and often recommends it for her students. This is just one example of accommodations that can be prearranged for unique circumstances. Additionally, VonLintel addresses both student and adult fears of the dog by respecting a person's boundaries and does not force unwanted participation.

Next, VonLintel (2014) strongly encourages keeping a binder full of resources to present to any educator, administrator, risk manager, parent, or school district employee who doubts the positive influence animal assisted interventions can have. In this binder, VonLintel suggests

keeping research studies, peer reviewed journal articles, personal testimonies, insurance documentation, veterinary approvals for the dog being used in the school, the dog's positive behavioral documentation by a preferred canine dog certifying agency, release statements, permission slips, and other documents that can be referenced at VonLintel's personal website, <http://www.schooltherapydogs.org>. VonLintel researched different insurance options as the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) does not currently include an insurance coverage when working with animals. VonLintel was able to secure a reliable insurance through her own personal finances, and this year, part of the cost of her yearly insurance was covered by her school's Parent Teacher Association. Having this insurance helped relieve worries the administrative office at the district had regarding liability issues that could arise if an animal were ever to hurt a student in the school setting. VonLintel also printed out the insurance documentation with details to include in her binder when meeting with school officials and parents.

Counseling with animal assisted interventions is not appropriate for all students or clients. Animals should not be brought into counseling sessions when the student has known animal fears or allergies. Some individuals have had negative experiences with dogs, or are simply afraid of them (Walsh, 2009b). However, counselors who choose to bring animals into classrooms as part of large group instruction may observe these children with fears or allergies showing interest in these animals (Nebbe, 1991). Although there may be challenges when bringing an animal to the counseling setting, these are simply obstacles and the animal assisted intervention does not have to end immediately. Nebbe (1991) suggests that if the counselor is able to respect the apprehension or fear that exists within the child, the animal assisted interventions will not interfere with the counseling relationship between the student and the

counselor. Additionally, Nebbe (1991) found that children are most often unable to resist petting a soft, furry animal. The fears, troubles, and challenges that child may be experiencing may be lessened due to the honesty and simplicity that a dog offers.

### **Application**

This paper demonstrates the long-standing history behind the human-animal bond and the assistance from animals during a counseling or therapeutic experience. However, there are limited resources for counselors to utilize when preparing to establish Animal Assisted Interventions within their own elementary school. The project portion of this paper will support the literature reviews, theoretical underpinnings, and recommendations from experienced professionals in this field in a website format found at <http://http://animalassistedinterventions.weebly.com/>.

The website will be available for the general population, particularly parents seeking further information regarding AAI, counselors interested in implementing AAI, and school administrators as they can educate themselves on the common misconceptions, challenges, and research supporting AAI. Working with an animal can bring forth several concerns for parents and administrators including fears, allergies, and logistics (Walsh, 2009b). The website will address these concerns, and include solutions to create a successful AAI experience for all parties involved. Although bringing AAI into an elementary school setting is shown to bring forth positive results for the students, this project is designed to collect research studies to form a clear understanding of the history and current ways to use AAI as a school counselor.

Furthermore, counselors can utilize this website to educate themselves on the practice of AAI. There are links on the website directing the counselor to experienced professionals in the dog training field, in the counseling field, as well as legal forms and considerations for AAI.

These resources can also be brought forth to school administrators to advocate for the privilege to utilize AAI within a given school. Lastly, the website will include other counselors' information to contact for further information regarding AAI, and links to appropriate organizations that support and train counselors and animals for AAI. The website can be utilized in a training to further inform educators and counselors on the topic of AAI and the benefits it has in the school counseling setting.

### **Conclusion**

Animals have the ability to make people feel protected, safe, and connected; basic needs that all children have (Sable, 2013). School counselors have the ability to choose the interventions that ethically fit the needs of their school counseling program. Animal Assisted Interventions is a technique that can be used in the school counseling program that enhances and potentially expedites a positive therapeutic relationship between the counselor and the client. Counselors can utilize animal assisted counseling as a way in which they encourage clients to engage and commit in the counseling experience (Minatrea, & Wesley, 2008). Each client will present unique characteristics and needs during their counseling experience. Animal assisted interventions can provide counselors with a skill set that is proven to benefit clients facing a variety of issues. Elementary school counselors can use animal assisted interventions to strengthen and develop a healthy and strong relationship with students (Chandler et al., 2010). From this point, counselors are then able to use animal assisted interventions in various ways to most effectively help students achieve their goals.

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Appendix A  
Website

<http://animalassistedinterventions.weebly.com>

# *Animal Assisted Interventions in School Counseling*

*Home Human-Animal Bond more...*



Welcome! This website was designed to provide counselors, educators, and parents pertinent information regarding Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) in the school counseling setting. There are several documents, articles, and personal professional experiences regarding AAI, and this website will bring together several important factors of AAI in hopes to educate the audience to help counselors bring AAI into their school, and provide beneficial information to educators and parents to understand why a counselor may choose to use AAI. Additionally, the section "Links" is dedicated to providing further information from informed professionals concerning legalities, animal health topics, and certifications for both the dog and the handler.

# *Animal Assisted Interventions in School Counseling*

*Home Human-Animal Bond more...*



## *The History of the Human-Animal Bond*

Below is a literature review from "Human-Animal Bonds I:  
The Relational Significance of Companion Animals" by Froma  
Walsh, PH.D.

Recent research confirms the positive effects animals can have on humans including physiological, psychological, and social benefits (Walsh, 2009a). However, there is little research in the mental health field regarding the significance of the human-animal bond. Dr. Froma (as cited in Walsh, 2009a) gathered information dating the human-animal bond back into ancient times when many traditions included the worship and honor of the relationships between people and animals as a link from the natural world to the spirit world. Chinese culture believes each person is born with characteristics of the animal on the Chinese calendar of the month and year of a person's birth. In addition, Walsh incorporates ancient folklore that includes mystical animals such as those that are part-lion and part-canine. In Egypt, both cats and dogs have been honored for centuries. Cats were even worshipped with the goddess Bastet, and dogs were considered to be loyal companions in the living life, and acted as guides during the afterlife.

When considering archeological proof, evidence reveals that people and domestic wolves lived in harmony over 14,000 years ago. Canines were valued for their intelligence, keen senses, and loyalty (Walsh, 2009a). Approximately 9,000 years ago, both dogs and cats played a vital role in agricultural communities as dogs were herding and assisting in farming, and cats were instinctively killing diseased rodents. These animals might have begun as servants to the humans, but became companions as time ensued (Walsh, 2009a).

Furthermore, Walsh (2009a) continues dating back the history of the human-animal bond into ancient Greek and Roman empires. During these times, dogs acted as hunters, herders, and guardians while simultaneously considered to be loyal and beloved pets. The graves (sometimes canine and human remains were buried together) and wording of epithets indicate the significance of the human-animal bond (Walsh, 2009a). The burial of humans with animals can also be found in Peru, as many burial sites of humans also included a dog buried nearby with a blanket and food.

Not only were animals viewed over the centuries as having a spiritual connection, but animals also serve as a prized possession of rulers and aristocracy (Walsh, 2009a). In some cases, animals were even given their own servants and lap dogs grew popular as they were known as “comforters.” Dogs were also prevalent in royal traditions in China and Europe, and still are to a degree. Currently, approximately 63% of United States households have companion animals, and over 75% of households that have children also have a pet. In the United States, dogs are the most common pets, followed by cats, then birds (Walsh, 2009a). Contemporary pet owners often pamper their pets, giving them treats, presents, social media attention, and include their pets in their daily living activities. In the last 30 years, research has correlated pet ownership with health benefits and revealed the pet owners were found to have lower blood pressure, serum triglycerides, and cholesterol levels (Walsh, 2009a). Walsh (2009a) included several similar studies in his article, “Human-Animal Bonds I: The Relational Significance of Companion Animals” that can be read in further indicating other positive benefits of pet ownership for an individual’s well-being including impacts on chronic conditions, illnesses, cancer, developmental disabilities, and psychological disabilities.

Specifically regarding dogs, which is the focus animal of the animal assisted interventions in the school-counseling field, biological anthropologists have concluded that dogs have “complex thinking and feelings and have acute sensory perception” (Walsh, 2009a, p. 468). Dogs are also able to read human cues and behavior including glances and subtle hand gestures, indicating that although dogs cannot speak verbally, they are able to understand and communicate with humans in other ways.

Animals can play a vital role in child development. Animals are present in a child’s life in a variety of ways including as pets, symbolic animals, fantasy animals, stuffed animals, and animals in stories/books (Walsh, 2009a). Walsh (2009a) includes many popular children’s books and fairy tales, making the presence of animals in a child’s life very frequent. Children are able to relate to animal characters, both fictional and those in real life, as many stories include lessons about life, love, and loss (Walsh, 2009a). Animals also affect child development as children often consider animals to be their peers, and often learn to read a dog’s body language. Walsh (2009a) summarizes a study indicating that some professionals find it easier to teach children to be empathetic with an animal rather than with a human because of the dog’s straight forward, clear, expression of his feelings and behaviors. This concept serves as a steppingstone for children to have high confidence, better moods, and greater empathy with humans.



Counselors often see child clients whose lives are comprised because of neglect, feelings of untrustworthiness, and/or abuse within human relationships. Walsh (2009a) includes several instances where pets (specifically dogs) help these clients overcome their troubled pasts. He states that these clients often form a strong bond with their pets as the animals meet the human needs of physical, emotional, and social contact while reducing or eliminating the fear that often exists within their home lives with humans. Other times counselors experience clients who find a new meaning in their lives through their pets. One example is a client who had suicidal ideations, but reported to his counselor that he could not carry out the suicide because he would abandon his pets (Walsh, 2009a). One of Walsh's own clients fell into a depressive lifestyle as he slept all day, became disconnected with any human relationships, and lost his job. Halfway through therapy, this client bought a puppy, and with this responsibility of being a pet owner he found motivation to get out of bed in the morning, to function in order to take care of the dog, to socialize at dog parks, and eventually became an interactive pet owner at a dog park where he met his future wife. Walsh summarizes these experiences as examples of how strong and important the human-animal bond can be.

Lastly, Walsh (2009a) includes an entire section of this article dedicated to Animal-Assisted Interventions. Walsh mentions the use of animal-assisted programs in countries such as Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. Settings can include schools, residential treatment centers, and prisons, with an even wider range of activities being utilized within each setting. Not only are counselors using animals to assist in interventions for their clients, but animals are also being used in programs that promote reading in children. Studies show reading to a pet (who is nonjudgmental) helps reduce shyness, anxiety, learning difficulties, and classroom embarrassment while reading. In other programs, animals are being used to aide in the recovery of people suffering from physical, cognitive, emotional, or social challenges, wounded veterans, and children with autism (Walsh, 2009a).

Many of these mentioned programs are in the younger stages of research, but are already showing success around the globe. Clients in residential settings are learning to take responsibility for the care of animals, they are able to experience empathy and nonthreatening affection, they promote prosocial behaviors, increase calm feelings, and increase focus for students with attention-deficit disorder and other learning disabilities in the public school systems (Walsh, 2009a). Walsh reiterates the importance of continuing research within animal assisted interventions as there are already proven client benefits such as increased physiological, psychological, and relational well-being. Walsh (2009a) states,

Fundamentally, humans are relational beings. Companion animals, although not for everyone, can meet many core psychosocial needs and enrich our lives. They provide pleasure and relaxation; deep affection and steadfast loyalty; and security and constancy in our changing lives. These attachments bring joy and comfort to children and adults and contribute to healthier, happier, and even longer lives. Bonds with companion animals may not be our whole lives, but they can make our lives whole. (Walsh, 2009a, p. 476)

Walsh, F. (2009a). Human-Animal Bonds I: The Relational Significance of Companion Animals. *Family Process*, 48(4), 462-480.  
doi:10.1111/j.1545-5300.2009.01296



### *Literature Review*

Lori Friesen (2010) communicates the urge to find innovative programs that are varied and creative to help children learn in today's society. Friesen explores the research that encourages bringing AAI into the school-counseling field. First, Friesen begins with the pioneer of AAI, Boris Levinson. To recap, Boris Levinson began bringing his dog into counseling sessions in the late 1960s and 1970s. Upon observing the interactions between the client and the dog, Levinson referred to the dog as a 'social lubricant' between the child client and himself, the therapist (Friesen, 2010). The dog was able to create a more relaxed atmosphere in the counseling setting, which ultimately lead to greater levels of self-disclosure for the client. Following these initial findings, researchers began actively collecting data on the psychological and physiological effects animals have on humans in the home, in therapeutic settings, in classrooms, hospitals, and in special-needs environments.

Friesen (2010) found that within the elementary school setting, researchers observed dogs improving the lives of children in many ways. The dog's presence increases the overall emotional stability for elementary school students, lowers behavioral, emotional, and verbal distress, increases students' positive attitudes towards schools, and promotes self-esteem. Lastly, dogs in the school classroom increase students' attentiveness, responsiveness, and cooperation with an adult (Friesen, 2010). In this unique relationship between the child and the dog, the child enters the relationship as the nurturing figure, and is accepted without judgment. However, with all of the benefits of AAI, criticisms do exist, and Friesen (2010) gives many suggestions to minimize potential challenges.

Friesen, L. (2010). Exploring animal-assisted programs with children in school and therapeutic contexts. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 37(4), 261-267.

## *Theories Supporting AAI*

Many theoretical approaches can be applied to animal assisted interventions. Person-centered counseling is the first theoretical underpinning that will be addressed for AAI. Person-centered counseling focuses on the nondirective approaches a counselor uses to ultimately increase self-acceptance within the client. The counselor often reflects on a client's verbal and nonverbal communication to promote self-exploration. Chandler, Portrie-Bethke, Barrio Minton, Fernando, and O'Callaghan (2010) state,

Person-centered counselors do not manage or direct a session; nor do they take responsibility for the client. Rather, they help clients to feel safe and open by being congruent, authentic, genuine, caring, accepting, warm, and empathetic. With this counseling experience, referred to as unconditional positive regard, clients increasingly trust themselves and move toward becoming more self-actualized. (p. 358)

Carl Roger's client-centered therapy follows this framework by allowing the animal's interactions with the student to be naturally full of unconditional positive regard. Rogers (1961) defines unconditional positive regard as accepting "fully and freely and without fear the positive feelings of another" (p. 81). Rogers continues this way of counseling by detailing the transition of positive regard between the client and the counselor. The client often enters into the counseling relationship unable to fully accept positive regard from the counselor. As the counselor accepts and respects the client, he is also able to identify the deep struggles of the client, thus experiencing an underlying commonality. Rogers expresses that when the counselor establishes these positive feelings of acceptance and respect, the client is then able to accept the inevitable reaction, which is to relax, and reduce tension as the client explores the struggles of their life throughout the counseling experience. When the counselor witnesses the animal's natural unconditional positive regard for the child, the counselor can emphasize the fact that the animal likes the child which often creates a positive relationship between the child and animal and lifts the child's demeanor (Trivedi & Perl, 1995).

Animals are often used in the counseling sessions spontaneously. Their presence in the room is enough to bring forth feelings of warmth and rapport between the counselor and the student. These feelings quicken the therapeutic process as the counselor is able to observe the child while they are verbally and/or nonverbally interacting with the dog and the counselor. The child is likely filled with positive emotions while interacting with the animals, which can encourage productive conversations and therapeutic growth (Trivedi & Perl, 1995).

Zilcha-Mano et al. (2011) researched the attachment perspective on Animal-Assisted Therapy. To review, their terminology is different than what is used within this paper, they define AAT as an umbrella term for diverse therapeutic approaches, used with people of all ages (from children to the elderly), in which an animal is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT involves interactions in the therapy room between a client, an animal (usually a dog), and a therapist, with the aim of improving therapeutic outcomes. (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011, p. 541)

Attachment theorists believe attachment orientations are formed during early childhood. If an attachment figure is present during the child's times of need, they are fostering attachment security, self-worth, adaptive emotion-regulation strategies, effective psychological functioning, and favorable mental health (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). Recently, researchers have investigated attachment theory in regards to non-human figures including God, places, inanimate objects, and animals. There are four pieces that complete the attachment bond puzzle; proximity seeking, safe haven, secure base, and separation distress. Research indicates that pets meet these specifications as most pet owners report feeling an emotional closeness to their pets, enjoy being close to their pets, feel their pets are a safe haven, and their pets provide support, comfort, and relief during times of distress (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011).



In the therapeutic mindset, Zilcha-Mano et al. (2011) explored Boris Levinson's comparison of animal and human relationships. Levinson suggested interpersonal relationships are often developed from hopes, aspirations, and disappointments where as animal-human relationships are usually less complicated, more predictable and consistent. Additionally, pets are frequently viewed as a secure base, and owners report feeling unconditional love and show no signs of abandoning the owner. These facts tie back into both the attachment theory and Carl Roger's child-centered therapy as they go hand in hand with unconditional positive regard.

There are two negative attachment perspectives: avoidant and anxiously attached. A client who is avoidant often turns away from forming new relationships and distances themselves from others as they often self-rely, and do not appropriately release their concerns (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). However, when this same client is working with an animal in the therapeutic process, the clients are often observed forming a positive bond with the dog as the pet accepts and responds positively to the client. This in turn creates feelings of adequacy and control for the client, reaffirming feelings of nurturing, dependence, and security, which can be safe (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011).

Anxiously attached clients often exhibit overdependence with another individual. The client is usually in need of more attention, affirmation, affection, and support from an individual, often as the result of experiencing an unreliable or insufficiently responsive attachment figure during their early childhood (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). When utilizing animal assisted interventions, clients are able to gain stability through the consistent presence of the animal, and the counselor. The dog is viewed as being emotionally stable, predictable, submissive, and secure. Previously, clients would be preoccupied trying to gauge interpersonal relationships, which can be unpredictable as humans often say one thing, yet act another way. Humans are often harder to "read" as well, whereas the dog readily awaits the client, greets them with kisses, a tail wagging, and is consistent in this behavior throughout their counseling sessions. This stability can free up the client's mind to do self-exploration as anxiety about an unpredictable relationship is diminished (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011).

School counselors must manage their time allotments with each student. School counseling schedules include life skill lessons, school duties, testing obligations, individual counseling, and group counseling, which is all dependent upon students' and teachers' schedules and obligations (ASCA, 2013a). Therefore, school counselors are in need of finding tools to reach students in the most effective ways possible. Therapeutic relationships take time to build. When counselors use animal assisted therapy, they have the ability to manage their time effectively while providing therapeutic advancements for the students. Linda Lloyd Nebbe (1991), describes the experience of using animals in her school counseling sessions as a way to more rapidly build rapport between her and the student (Nebbe, 1991). By sharing a special interest such as the animal, their bond is strengthened as the child trusts and respects the counselor.

School counselors are educated and trained to help students socially, emotionally, and academically (ASCA, 2013a). Elementary school aged children (5-12) are developing in many ways that influence their daily functioning while at school, fortunately, school counselors are often able to guide and teach children life skills, coping skills, confidence, values, and help the children achieve their goals. One aspect of understanding a client is to understand their attachment style. Animals bring about a unique perspective on attachment that counselors can utilize in the school setting as they relate key characteristics and functions that both animals and humans have in common (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). Recent studies have shown that animals have reduced the feelings of loneliness in people and provide social support. Although observations and self-reports have identified the benefits of animals on human attachment, scientists have found that when a person is petting or interacting with an animal the human brain can trigger the production of oxytocin, a pleasure and stress-reducing hormone (Sable, 2013). Additionally, when secure attachments are built between the animals and the student, the student is then able to relate to and build a secure relationship with the counselor. Finally, counselors can follow the lead of the naturally playful child and dog as it is often hard for adults to dive into a playful context (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011).

Choice theorist, William Glasser, states that human relationships are difficult to solve, but surprisingly easy to understand. In choice theory, Glasser emphasizes that one must understand and accept that you can only control your own behavior, and no one else's (Glasser, 1997). Combining choice theory and animal assisted interventions, school counselors can teach responsibility and respect while guiding the student and animal's interactions (Trivedi & Perl, 1995). Glasser (1997) describes the four needs of choice theory as the need to belong, to have power, to have freedom, and to have fun. At birth each individual identifies how these needs will be reached to create their own unique quality world. Individuals then act in ways that will lead to the fulfillment of each need to create a quality world.

Reality therapy is the style of therapy commonly used with Choice Theory. To demonstrate how animal assisted interventions can be used in Reality Therapy (RT), there are a few common questions that are asked that can be tailored when used with AAI; "What do you want?" and "What are you doing to get what you want?" Minatrea and Wesley (2008) followed a counselor and her dog Mitzi Ann, who was trained to do tricks during the RT counseling sessions. The clients were asked what they want the dog to do, and how are they going to get her to do it? The clients are then challenged to complete various tasks with Mitzi Ann, both verbally and nonverbally. This approach is just one example of how animals can be used within RT; in this case the dog was used as a metaphor in a very realistic manner.

Although this example is extremely specific and took planning to accomplish, Minatrea and Wesley (2008) state that animal assisted interventions are more about spontaneous teachable moments. The dog can be spoken to when describing feelings, actions of affection, sensitivity to changes in a person's voice, and the dog can even be used to explain manners/polite acts such as getting a tissue when someone sneezes (Minatrea & Wesley, 2008). Lastly, to reaffirm the use of a dog within the school counseling setting, Minatrea and Wesley (2008) emphasize that AAI can aide in augmenting a counselor's counseling theory, increase both verbal and non-verbal communication, and provide a concrete method to teach problem solving techniques to the students.

Chandler, C. K., Portrie-Bethke, T. L., Barrio Minton, C. A., Fernando, D. M., & O'Callaghan, D. M. (2010). Matching animal-assisted therapy techniques and intentions with counseling guiding theories. *Journal Of Mental Health Counseling*, 32(4), 354-374.

Glasser, W. (1997). "Choice theory" and student success. *Education Digest*, 63(3), 16.

Minatrea, N. B., & Wesley, M. C. (2008). Reality therapy goes to the dogs. *International Journal Of Reality Therapy*, 28(1), 69-77.

Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Trivedi, L., & Perl, J. (1995). Animal facilitated counseling in the elementary school: A literature review and practical. *Elementary School Guidance & Counseling*, 29(3), 223.

# *Animal Assisted Interventions in School Counseling*

*Home Human-Animal Bond more...*

## *Helpful Links:*

This is just one example of the many uses for dogs in the counseling field. Following a school shooting, this counselor details the impact dogs have on the healing process.



Click this link for a fellow school counselor's website titled School Therapy Dogs. This website has information including recommended forms to keep on file while using animals in the counseling settings, resources, links, and directions on how to start integrating a dog into the school setting. <http://www.schooltherapydogs.org/>

Pet Partners Website: <http://www.petpartners.org/>

Therapy Dogs International: <http://www.tdi-dog.org/>



## School Counseling Department



### *From the Field...*

While researching Animal Assisted Interventions in the School Counseling field, several blogs, articles, and school websites surfaced providing practical information regarding AAI. The websites below include blogs from counselors and many have suggested lesson plans utilizing AAI. In addition, the successes and triumphs within AAI are detailed, illustrating the benefits AAI provides to not only one student, but to the overall success and unity of a school. Professionals also include recommended schedules, tips while working with dogs, and solutions for common fears, allergies, and scheduling conflicts.

<http://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/news/article.aspx?id=5209>

<http://entirelyelementary.blogspot.com/2012/10/our-therapy-dog-friend.html>

[http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/20\\_1/20\\_1\\_13\\_Dogs.pdf](http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/20_1/20_1_13_Dogs.pdf)

[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_admin/admin/admin559.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin559.shtml)

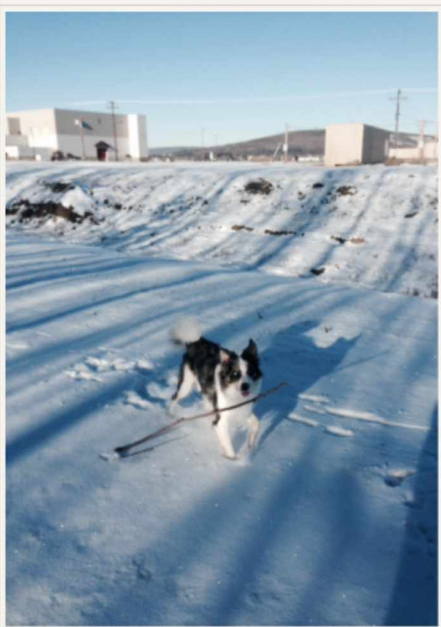
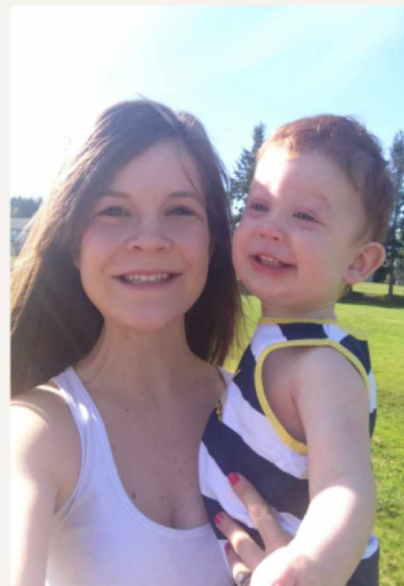
<https://www.baltimorebrew.com/2012/05/29/dog-as-teacher-lessons-in-love-empathy-and-patience-in-a-baltimore-classroom/>

[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_admin/admin/admin559.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin559.shtml)

## *About Me*

Thank you for visiting this website. I hope the information has been helpful and educational. For further information, please visit the link connections page to visit other information hubs.

Currently, I am a graduate candidate for my Masters of Education in School Counseling at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. My husband is in the military stationed at Fort Wainwright. Together we have our son Wyatt, and our border collie, Cooper. Cooper is in the process of being certified with the hopes of working with me in a school counseling settings one day. My passion for working with both children and animals drove this project to its completion. Combining two of my passions together creates a sense of pride and enjoyment when I look towards my future career endeavors. This project is in partial fulfillment for the requirements of the degree of Masters of Education in Counseling. Thank you to my committee for assisting in the planning and execution of this project, and for my family and their patience and support throughout this process.



## *Contact me for further information or questions*

Name \*

First

Last

Email \*

Comment \*

Submit

The following files are lesson plans that I created based off the ASCA National Standards for Students.

American School Counselor Association (2013). ASCA National Standards for Students. Alexandria, VA: Author.



**Same Dog, New Trick**  
[Download File](#)



**Home Safe**  
[Download File](#)



**I Have Boundaries!**  
[Download File](#)



**Relaxation**  
[Download File](#)



**Dog's Best Friend**  
[Download File](#)





Appendix B  
Lesson Plans

Lesson Plan with AAI

**Activity:** Same Dog, NEW trick!

**Grade(s):** 3-6

**ASCA Student Standards (Domain/Standard/Competencies):**

Academic Development

Standard A- Students will acquire the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that contribute to effective learning in school and across the life span.

Improve Academic Self-Concept

**Learning Objective(s):**

1. Accept mistakes as essential to the learning process
2. Identify attitudes and behaviors that lead to success

**Materials:** Certified therapy dog, dog treats, and a recording log (paper and pencil)

**Procedure:** The counselor will begin by listing the “tricks” the dog currently knows. The students will then raise their hands and make a classroom list of tricks they can possibly teach the dog. The counselor and the class will engage in a discussion as they select new tricks to teach, and create a method to teach the tricks. Next, the counselor will demonstrate using a treat to motivate the dog, how to teach the dog the trick. When the dog does not do the trick the first time, such as rolling over, this is an appropriate time to elaborate on the time it takes to learn new concepts. Additionally, the dog’s body language (ears up, tail wagging, panting) can be clues to his happy demeanor. He will try again and again to learn the new trick, and students can volunteer to help. The classroom discussion will refocus to the standards of positive behaviors and attitudes that we as humans can have to help us learn new things. Allow students to create a list of positive behaviors, and behaviors that could cause set backs in the learning process (giving up, stomping feet, throwing, yelling, saying they cannot do it). This can be continued through multiple sessions to demonstrate the dog’s determination to learn a new trick.

**Plan for Evaluation:** The counselor is responsible for engaging students in classroom discussion. Group contribution to a comprehensive list of tricks for a dog, positive behaviors and attitudes essential for success, and the method needed to teach new tricks will illustrate the students' knowledge, participation, and understanding. Lastly, after each session, the students should be given the opportunity to identify the lessons learned, and ask any questions not answered.

## Lesson Plan with AAI

**Activity:** Home Safe

**Grade(s):** K-3

**ASCA Student Standards (Domain/Standard/Competencies):**

Personal/Social Development

Standard C- Students will Understand Safety and Survival Skills-Acquire Self

Knowledge

-Acquire Personal Safety Skills

**Learning Objective(s):**

1. Demonstrate knowledge of personal information (telephone number, home address, emergency contact info)

**Materials:** Certified therapy dog, dog collar, dry erase sheets/markers

**Procedure:** The counselor will begin by asking students how adults can help find the owners of a lost dog. How do lost dogs get home? First, discuss how a dog has a keen sense of smell, humans cannot track their steps, or find their homes by smell. Humans also do not wear collars. Discuss whom students can go to for help if they are lost, and whom they can tell their personal information to. Ask if students know their personal information. Provide dry erase sheets that have labeled sections for telephone number, home address, and emergency contact info. Have students practice writing the correct information.

**Plan for Evaluation:** Individually meet with students and the dog to discuss safe adults, and allow child to tell counselor and dog their personal identification information.



## Lesson Plan with AAI

**Activity:** I have boundaries!

**Grade(s):** K-6

**ASCA Student Standards (Domain/Standard/Competencies):**

Personal/Social Development

Standard A: Students will acquire the knowledge, attitudes and interpersonal skills to help them understand and respect self and others.

-Acquire Self Knowledge

**Learning Objective(s):**

1. Recognize personal boundaries, rights and privacy needs

**Materials:** Certified therapy dog, a dog bed, and a dog kennel.

**Procedure:** The counselor will begin by questioning the students' current knowledge of personal boundaries, rights, and privacy needs. Gauging the knowledge of the students, the counselor will then define the terms privacy, rights, and boundaries in the context of the school setting. Bring dog to his bed, identify this as his current boundary, comparing this spot that the dog is supposed to stay in as being similar to sitting and remaining in assigned seats. Elaborate on the need for order and still bodies during lessons and to maintain classroom management. Demonstrate the kennel as being a safe place for the dog, and explain the safety aspect of not touching a dog in a kennel without asking for an adult's assistance prior to approaching dog. Ask students for ideas about human personal boundaries, and how we can say no to someone who is stepping over our boundaries. Invite students to role-play. Lastly, conclude with privacy including sharing information with others that is not ours to share. The dog does not share our secrets; he is respectful of our privacy. Have students practice listening with our ears, and speaking less, just like dogs do, as they are great listeners.

**Plan for Evaluation:** Group students into small groups. Assign each group to identify common personal boundaries. Secondly, groups should create respectful ways to protect us regarding privacy needs and personal boundaries, present to class (this section is recommended for older grades).

## Lesson Plan with AAI

**Activity:** Relaxation

**Grade(s):** K-6

**ASCA Student Standards (Domain/Standard/Competencies):**

Personal/Social Development

Standard C: Students will Understand Safety and Survival Skills

Acquire Personal Safety Skills

**Learning Objective(s):**

1. Learn techniques for managing stress and conflict

**Materials:** Certified therapy dog, a quiet corner, paper/crayons

**Procedure:** The counselor will begin by telling students times that are commonly stressful for humans, and commonly stressful for dogs. Part of having a dog in the school is making sure he is safe, and not overly stressed which can happen in busier places. Review the rules of approaching the dog in the school. Review with the children the research supporting AAI in relation to lowering stress levels. Allow students to demonstrate appropriate relaxing scenarios with the dog (laying down, petting, taking a walk) and ask for more suggestions to help us relax with, or without, the assistance of a dog.

**Plan for Evaluation:** Individually, ask students to draw or write their favorite relaxation techniques, and then identify two new ways to relax that they would like to try in the next week.

## Lesson Plan with AAI

**Activity:** Dog's Best Friend

**Grade(s):** K-6

**ASCA Student Standards (Domain/Standard/Competencies):**

Personal/Social Development

Standard A: Students will acquire the knowledge, attitudes and interpersonal skills to help them understand and respect self and others.

-Acquire Interpersonal Skills

**Learning Objective(s):**

1. Know that communication involves speaking, listening, and nonverbal behavior
2. Learn how to make and keep friends

**Materials:** Certified therapy dog, volunteers for role-play

**Procedure:** The counselor will begin by walking the dog around the classroom in a non-direct manner. The counselor will tell students that the dog is friendly with everyone in this classroom, as all students should be friendly towards each other. Ask for volunteers to tell the classroom why the dog is friendly to everyone. Remind students of how we treat the dog, students are gentle, kind, respectful, and genuine around the dog. These are qualities that friends show each other. Explain to the class that dogs are nonjudgmental, as humans should be as well. Dogs do not interrupt, instead, they listen. Show the class different positions of the dog's ear and how it correlates to alertness. Ask for role-plays of a friend who interrupts, one who is a good listener, one who has appropriate body language for a listening friend, and one with inappropriate body language. Use dog as well. Encourage students to list good qualities in a friendship, and qualities that could ruin friendships.

**Plan for Evaluation:** Group students into small groups. Assign each group a scenario and a character. Allow observing group members to guess the role the student was assigned. Groups can present to class as time allows.