

Effects of Animal-Assisted Therapy on Expression of Pro-social
Behaviors in Children with PDD

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This study measured the effects of interaction with dogs on the behavior of children with Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD). PDD is characterized by a lack of social interactions and communication skills (APA, 1994). Unfortunately, traditional therapies have not proved particularly advantageous for this population (Volkmar, 2001), necessitating the development of a more effective modality of treatment. Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) may be just that treatment. However, much of the information available about AAT is qualitative or anecdotal (Voelker, 1995), and there is a need to scientifically examine this assertion.

To fill this gap, the current study used a within-group repeated measures experimental design to assess the effect of interaction with dogs on children with PDD. Ten children diagnosed with PDD were each exposed to three conditions: a therapist and: (a) a non-social toy, (b) a stuffed dog, or (c) a live dog. Children participated in 45 sessions, all of which were videotaped and coded in terms of Behavioral and Verbal interactions.

Results, all of which are significant at $p < .05$, reveal that children were more likely to play catch with the dog, laughed more frequently in the dog condition, and looked at the dog more often than the ball or the stuffed dog. Also, children were less likely to talk about topics unrelated to the research protocol. However, they were less apt to talk about themselves or the therapist in the dog condition .

Taken together, the results of this experiment indicate that interaction with dogs may have some positive benefits for children with PDD: Children appear happier, more playful, and more focused when in the presence of the dog. With this scientific base, it is possible to begin to further test the implications of this study.