

“Exploring the Therapeutic Value between Pets and People; an OTA Student's Perspective”

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During my coursework as an Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA) major at Brown Mackie College in Akron, Ohio the final project for the Management, Scholarship and Professional Responsibilities course was to identify a need within the community for which OT services could be established or have a positive influence. The first step in the assignment was to perform a literature search on a current evidence-based practice regarding the focus of our project that would help reinforce its efficacy. Being an animal lover, so I suggested to the project group that we create an inter-professional collaboration between the OTA and the Veterinary Technology program regarding animal-assisted therapy. The second step was to create an idea for a project that would be sustainable and related to the evidence found within the literature on the topic chosen. It was not expected, however, that the project would be conducted for the purposes of this course.

Within OT practice, the therapeutic use of pets is often considered to be an occupation-based or preparatory intervention, depending on how it is incorporated into one's therapeutic goals and intervention process. The therapeutic use of pets often helps to foster social participation. Additionally, from a sensory-based lens, the therapeutic use of pets in OT practice may be used to foster self-regulation, sensory modulation, discrimination, motor performance and praxis skills in order to ultimately foster participation in meaningful life roles and occupations (OT Innovations, nd). Thus, the therapeutic use of pets and animal-assisted therapies is often incorporated into OT practice to help meet one's therapeutic needs and goals.

The literature review revealed some of the following information about the influence of pets and animal-assisted therapies with different populations. According to Dr. Edward Creagan, professor of oncology at the Mayo Clinic, pets help to foster health and wellness. Further studies have shown the positive effects of how holding and petting a cat can have on lowering a client's heart rate and blood pressure with clients in a nursing home setting (Morrison, 2007).

Researchers have discovered that a twelve-minute visit with a dog helped heart and lung function by lowering pressures, lowering the release of harmful hormones, and decreasing anxiety among clients hospitalized with heart failure; the benefits outweighed those that resulted from being left alone or from a visit from a volunteer (American Heart Association, 2005). Creagan suggested that our pet companions provide a source of pleasure and connection to the world, and according to Fine (2015) for some clients, it offers them hope and a reason to live.

Gretchen Carlisle, a research fellow at the Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction, led a study that surveyed 70 families that had children with autism between the ages of eight and eighteen. Nearly 70 percent of the families that participated were dog owners. The data revealed that in families with dogs, the children were more likely to engage in behaviors such as introducing themselves, asking for information, or responding to other client's questions (Carlisle, 2014). In another study exploring the benefits of pet therapy with clients with post traumatic stress disorder, participants working with dogs demonstrated lowered heart rates and improved changes in stress response and increased levels of oxytocin (a hormone that reduces stress and is released when people relationally close to others) (Lin, 2013). According to Friesen's article, *Exploring Animal-Assisted Programs with Children in School and Therapeutic Contexts*, animal-assisted therapy is becoming popular in school based and therapeutic settings across the country (Friesen, 2009).

The therapeutic pet project proposed would consist of the OTA students, with guidance from the OTA instructors, interfacing the child or adult with the animal by teaching the importance of caring for pets such as feeding, grooming and properly interacting with the pet. The animals that would be made available to participate in the therapeutic pet project would be from a local animal shelter, with which the Veterinary Technology program already had an established relationship. The experience/interaction would take place at the Vet Tech building where housing is already set up for the animals. The OTA and Vet Tech students would be learning each discipline's contribution to the program and would be learning inter-professional collaboration skills as well. Educational handouts on the program and how to care for the pets would be made available. Information on the local therapy dog program would also be provided for those that might benefit more from a trained therapy dog.

The potential benefits to the community regarding the therapeutic project are many and are listed below:

- The service would be offered at no cost since the students will be required to conduct the outreach as part of a grade.
- The Student Occupational Therapy Association club and the Veterinary Technology club would accept donations and have fundraisers in order to obtain the needed program supplies.
- The shelter would initially assess the animals, which would be primarily dogs and cats, by testing their temperaments to determine if they would be appropriate for the therapeutic pet program. This would serve as a pre-screening to identify whether the animals could tolerate working with children and adults.

- The animals may also have future homes due to the potential of being adopted by those participating in the program, if a positive fit is established.

This assignment has allowed this project group to combine our love for helping others and love for animals with our future roles as occupational therapy assistants. Exploring the research on the therapeutic benefits of interacting with animals and animal assisted therapy is enlightening. Providing education and resources to the public on these therapeutic options demonstrates one way that occupational therapy practitioners can support the public about the therapeutic benefits of pets and animal assisted therapies. Exploring a potential therapeutic pet project opportunity for our final project in Management, Scholarship and Professional Responsibilities class has been inspiring and provides ideas that may be used for a potential project for future implementation.

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