

Animal-Assisted Intervention in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Critical Review

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Introduction

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2014 Community Report on Autism identified 1 in 68 children in the United States as having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Despite the increasing prevalence, psychology research has been unable to identify any universal therapies or preventative measures for the treatment of childhood ASD. Therefore, it is important to explore the efficacy of alternative treatment options such as animal-assisted intervention (AAI).
- AAI is a general term which includes the subcategories of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and animal-assisted activity (AAA).

Materials and Methods

- A review was conducted in order to effectively examine current research on the impact of AAI.
- The review was designed with respect to the American Psychological Association's "Reporting Standards for Research in Psychology" (APA, 2008), which emphasizes the importance of inclusion and exclusion criteria.
- Prior research was reviewed to determine appropriate criteria for evaluating the efficacy of AAI in children with ASD. Search engines such as PsycINFO, UDiscover, and PubMed were used to gather journal articles for analysis.

Results

- 15 studies were selected for review as a result of meeting established inclusion and exclusion criteria.
- Studies most commonly included AAI with horses and dogs, including horseback riding or sensitivity training.
- All studies reported positive effects of AAI on participants' prosocial behavior, such as increased collaborative play, or communication frequency.

Conclusions

- Many studies were limited by methodological issues such as not measuring pre-treatment characteristics (for example, intelligence quotient [IQ]), which could impact participants' positive response to AAI.

Future Directions

- Assess pre-treatment characteristics prior to the introduction of AAI.
- Utilize research design methods which limit methodological concerns and adhere to established guidelines for psychosocial treatments in children with ASD.
- Include larger and more diverse samples in studies.

References

- Publications, A. P. A., on Journal, C. B. W. G., & Standards, A. R. (2008). Reporting standards for research in psychology: why do we need them? What might they be?. *The American Psychologist*, 63(9), 839.