

Dog-assisted Therapy in School Counselling

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Abstract

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore the use of animals, in particular dogs, in my own practice as a school counsellor. Animal-assisted therapy has been defined as the presentation of an animal in counselling with the intention of providing a positive impact on an individual's health or well-being (Friesen, 2009). The use of animal-assisted therapy in schools is not common practice, likely because of medical concerns such as infectious disease, allergies, and trauma resulting from bites or kicks (Beck & Meyers, 1996; Friesen, 2009). This inquiry is focused on the use of dogs within a school counselling setting. It explores three themes: the therapy dog's ability to reduce anxiety in a counselling setting for children, the use of therapy dogs to facilitate the relationship between the counsellor and the student, and finally, the benefits the therapy dog provides for the counselling team. Dogs in the counselling office may improve and expedite relationship building between a counsellor and client by reducing anxiety in children entering a counselling environment. This could in turn benefit counsellors by enhancing their overall efficiency and productivity in the school.

Dog-assisted Therapy in School Counselling

Introduction

Animals have been used as informal mental health advocates for decades and in the form of companionship for centuries (Athy, 2005). The purpose of this inquiry is to explore the use of animals, in particular dogs, in my own practice as a school counsellor. My personal experiences with animals have shown me they can provide companionship, unconditional love and consistency in an individual's life. Through my own teaching, it has become more evident to me that we are living in a fear-based society. I believe this is naturally leading to increased anxiety in all age groups. I am suggesting that dog-assisted therapy could assist in and speed up the development of the counselling relationship. Dog-assisted therapy could help school counsellors be more successful in minimizing the social emotional problems that are increasing in the student population. This paper will focus on three main advantages for the use of dog-assisted therapy in school counselling. The first is the use of dogs in therapy to help children communicate their feelings more freely. The second is the ability for dog-assisted therapy to help facilitate the school counsellor and student relationship. Finally, a therapy dog on the counselling team could help enhance the school counsellor's overall productivity in the school.

Throughout history, animals have been viewed in different ways by various cultural groups. For example, the Maya indigenous peoples of Central America believe in individual 'spirit animals' being assigned at birth (Serpell, 2006). In India, cattle are viewed as sacred animals and are therefore not eaten as they are in other parts of the world (Harris, Bose, Klass, & Mencher, 1966). In the 19th century, domesticated pets were commonly used in England to help create a more pleasing atmosphere in different medical institutions (Palley, Rourke, & Niemi,

2010; Serpell, 2006). One of the first documented uses of animals in a therapeutic program was in the 1970s in which a York (UK) Retreat developed a therapeutic program for mentally ill patients to take care of small domestic animals (Palley et al., 2010).

Animals have many positive effects on people including their ability to elicit joy and even humor for those interacting with them (Beck & Meyers, 1996). One of the first to practice animal-assisted therapy was Boris Levinson, an American child psychiatrist (as cited in Dhooper, 2003; Friesen, 2009). Levinson (1969) reported that children are better able to communicate their feelings with a dog present in a therapy session. I believe this is related to the calming effects animals can have on us. In my own experience, dogs have always created a sense of calmness for me. This could be attributed to the connection I have had with dogs throughout my life.

Animal-assisted therapy has been defined as the presentation of an animal in counselling with the intention of providing a positive impact on an individual's health or well-being (Friesen, 2009). The use of animal-assisted therapy in schools is not common practice, likely because of medical concerns such as infectious disease, allergies, and trauma resulting from bites or kicks (Beck & Meyers, 1996; Friesen, 2009). There are only a few studies that have looked at the use of animal-assisted therapy in practices with children and even fewer have been completed in a school setting (Tsai, Erika, & Thomas, 2010). In a study conducted by Anderson and Olson (2006) dogs were found to help with the emotional stability of elementary school aged children with severe emotional disorders. It has also been found that the self-esteem of children can be improved through the bond created by having an animal 'friend' at school (Friesen, 2009; Zasloff, Hart, & DeArmond, 1999).

When a dog is present in the classroom, children have been found to be more cooperative and alert towards an adult (Friesen, 2009; Limond, Bradshaw, & Cormack, 1997). This alertness

and increased attention span has also been seen with the use of a dog in a therapeutic setting, along with increased social openness and engagement in therapy sessions (Chandler, 2012; Friesen, 2009; Prothmann, Bienert, & Ettrich, 2006). The use of animals can encourage the development and ease the process of the child building a relationship with the therapist (Athys, 2005; Chandler, 2012; Palley et al., 2010).

It was found by Lockwood (1983) that the perceived character of a person can be improved by the simple presence of a pet in a picture. Research has shown that an individual's attachment to their pets continues throughout the life cycle from childhood to adulthood (Sable, 1995). This attachment is a large part of an individual's emotional well-being and highlights the advantages of using pets in the treatment of mental health (Sable, 1995). Animals can be used to develop the mental health and well-being of children who are unable to advocate for themselves (Obrusnikova, Bibik, Cavalier, & Manley, 2012).

Animal therapy is commonly used for social work, marriage and family counselling. It can take on many forms from an animal being present in a room, to an animal allowing someone to pet them, to an animal replacing and functioning as a person's, limbs, ears or eyes (Dhooper, 2003). I am suggesting that the use of animal-assisted therapy in a school could potentially increase the overall productivity of a school counsellor. The use of a dog in a school counsellor's office could expedite the overall counselling process. It could help with building the counsellor client relationship by providing a comfortable atmosphere and providing a topic for conversation.

Definition of Terms

Animal-assisted therapy - the presentation of an animal to a person or people with the intention of providing a positive impact on that person or those peoples' health or well-being (Friesen,

2009)

Anxiety- Frequency, intensity, severity, breadth, and mix of symptoms powerful enough to adversely impact social, occupational, and overall functioning of an individual represent the defining characteristics of anxiety as a disorder (American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, 2013).

Structure of Capstone Paper

Chapter 1 is a review of relevant literature regarding dog-assisted therapy and animal-assisted therapy. In this chapter, the benefits of animal-assisted therapy, in particular dog-assisted therapy, are discussed through relevant literature and research studies. Chapter 2 discusses how dog-assisted therapy could be implemented and beneficial in an elementary school counselling setting. It also addresses some of the possible drawbacks of the use of dogs in this capacity. Throughout the paper, the term pet is used synonymously with dogs in many instances throughout the paper. Chapter 3 is the concluding chapter. It summarizes chapter 1 and chapter 2 and also addresses areas where further research in dog therapy is needed.

Chapter 1 - Review of Relevant Literature

There are many benefits of the pet-human relationship presented in literature and research studies. Some benefits found in research on animal-assisted therapy include: improved communication and socialization, reduction of general anxiety, decreased stress levels, reduced isolation, increased pleasure, reduced depression, and increased memory (Athy, 2005; Bassette & Taber-Doughty, 2013; Bell, 2013; Chandler, 2012; Friedmann et al., 1983; Obrusnikova et al., 2012). It also has been shown to assist with grief and loss, increase self-esteem, promote self-worth, improve problem-solving ability, increase concentration, heighten engagement, increase ability to trust others, and learn what appropriate touch looks like (Athy, 2005; Bassette & Taber-Doughty, 2013; Bell, 2013; Chandler, 2012; Friedmann et al., 1983; Obrusnikova et al., 2012).

Studies have shown that pets can be used to reduce blood pressure and lead to health benefits including the increased survival rate of heart attack patients after returning home (Sable, 1995). Pets can offer an extended social network through nurturance and attachment (Friesen, 2009; Sable, 1995). They can also act as a substitute to fill the emotional absence felt by the loss of a human, adding to one's life pleasure and feeling of security and friendship throughout difficult times in life (Friesen, 2009; Sable, 1995). Pets can help people who are experiencing a feeling of being an outcast in life by providing stability and companionship to reduce loneliness (Sable, 1995; Dhoper, 2003).

Animals provide all of these different types of help because they are always ready and willing to give or receive unconditional love and affection (Sable, 1995). Animals, in particular dogs, are non-judgmental, and provide affection regardless of human inadequacies such as disability, age, or race (Roux & Kemp, 2009; Dhoper, 2003). One of the main benefits of

having a pet is companionship. Animals give humans someone to care for, they provide pleasurable activity and play, consistency in life, and they are enjoyable to watch (Dhooper, 2003; Obrusnikova et al., 2012). Pets do not reflect back the discomfort and concern humans are feeling in a difficult situation, instead they are engaging, accepting, and calming through their interactions (Chandler, 2012; Dhooper, 2003; Friesen, 2009). These are some of the ways that pets can be beneficial for humans.

Pets have been said to be a buffer between humans and stress or illness (Chandler, 2012). As stated by Siegel (1990), the ability of pets to act as buffers between humans and stressful events is documented through fewer doctor visits during periods of stress. If one can learn to control and reduce this stress at a young age, the long-term effects would be substantial. Stasi et al., (2004) states that blood pressure can be lowered through animal interactions. Multiple studies have considered that interacting with animals on a regular basis can reduce blood pressure and therefore assist in the prevention of heart attacks and consequently survival (Beck & Meyers, 1996).

Research is beginning to show that having a pet enhances an individual's quality of life, however, these benefits are very difficult to assess scientifically (Sable, 1995). Lockwood (1983), is one of the first to report on the perceived happier, friendlier, more relaxed and less threatening responses felt by people looking at photos or artwork featuring the presence of a dog. It is this same theory that causes people to see others as more welcoming, caring and positive in general. This theory is referred to as the Halo Effect (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). An animal in a counselling office has the same effect, leading people to see the counsellor as more welcoming and in a positive light, therefore improving their social attractiveness (Beck & Meyers, 1996). Pets can enhance an individual's happiness as well as their perceived character.

Dogs have many potential uses in a counseling office. They have the ability to provide an emotional bond and connection that promotes a sense of well-being and security for humans (Obrusnikova et al., 2012; Sable, 1995). This supports evidence that suggests the attitudes that children have about themselves and their self-esteem can be positively affected by the simple presence of animals (Beck & Meyers, 1996; Friesen, 2009). Through animal-assisted therapy, the animal acts as a catalyst to fuel discussions through their simple presence, allowing for smooth transitions and fast relationship building (Beck & Meyers, 1996; Chandler, 2012; Geist, 2011). The counsellor utilizes the trained animal as a way to facilitate conversation by creating connections and making communication with the client more natural (Athy, 2005; Chandler, 2012). Due to the unconditional acceptance of the dog, the child often feels more comfortable with the therapist faster (Chandler, 2012; Dhooper, 2003; Friesen, 2009). The dog facilitates a feeling of control by allowing the client to pet it and builds the self-confidence of the child (Dhooper, 2003). All of these benefits are elicited by the simple presence of a dog in the counseling office.

Levinson (1983) states that animals can satisfy the psychological needs of a human, the need for loyalty, trust, affection and respect. This important role filled by an animal is not possible through the use of hobbies or toys. Studies have shown that toy animals do not hold the same amount of interest and focus as a live animal for the purpose of therapy (Beck & Meyers, 1996). Animals in a child's life provide the opportunity for children to learn many important life lessons, such as death and grief, as well as how to care for something both physically and emotionally. Animals help children feel needed as well as loved and respected (Dhooper, 2003; Rayment, 2004).

Dogs can be utilized in teaching children and adolescents different social skills including, but not limited to, non-verbal communication. Animal-assisted therapy can also be useful for showing clients appropriate child-to-child pro-social behaviours (Prothmann, Albrecht, Dietrich, Hornfeck, Stieber & Ettrich, 2005). Non-verbal communication is as important, if not more important, than verbal communication in regulating and expressing emotions and feelings (Prothmann et al., 2005). It is difficult to communicate non-verbally in a natural way. However, children tend to naturally communicate with animals non-verbally (Prothmann et al., 2005). People often communicate with animals by using facial expressions, gestures, physical touch and postures to portray emotions (Prothmann et al., 2005). These non-verbal signals are difficult to consciously avoid or hide, especially from animals (Prothmann et al., 2005). As clients connect with the animal, they are able to utilize the unique non-verbal relationship created between humans and dogs (Geist, 2011). Animals may help children who use non-verbal communication, learn how to be compassionate and caring in a special way (Beck & Meyers, 1996). Social skills are important life skills that are developed in childhood and built upon throughout a lifetime.

Dogs have the ability to create a strong social attachment with humans. In a study conducted in Japan, urinary oxytocin levels were tested in two different study groups, both composed of dog owners (Nagasawa, 2009). Oxytocin is a hormone that is released during lactation and childbirth, and is said to decrease stress during the stress response. One group had their oxytocin levels tested after experiencing a long gaze with their dog and the other had their oxytocin levels tested after a short gaze experienced with their dog. The results of the study found that both the short and long gaze groups had increased levels of urinary oxytocin after the experiment. It has been shown that humans with increased oxytocin have decreased anxiety and

depressive tendencies. This study allows for further insight into the strength of the human dog relationship (Nagasawa, 2009).

Dogs can be used to address social skills with children. Studies have found that children portray less behavioural distress when in the presence of a dog (Tsai et al., 2010). In a study conducted on animal contact and children with attention-deficit hyperactive disorders and defiant disorders, it was found that the children who were allowed to contact the animals had less anti-social behaviours and violent behaviours as well as better attendance and improved knowledge and skills (Beck & Meyers, 1996). These social skill improvements for children with attention-deficit hyperactive disorders and defiant disorders would be very beneficial in a school setting.

The use of animal-assisted therapy may provide a more efficient way to calm and refocus a child who is experiencing a stressful situation. Giest (2011) describes the use of therapy dogs at a school for children with emotional and behavioural struggles. The school has five therapy dogs and twenty staff trained to work with them. The dogs are utilized when children are experiencing stressful or serious emotional struggles. Students will be taken out of the classroom because of their current state and lead to a social worker's office with a therapy dog present. The dogs are trained to maintain eye-contact and place their head on the client's lap. Giest (2011) states that when a child enters the counsellor office in an escalated state, talking about the issue tends to heighten his or her stress. She reports that the use of a therapy dog has decreased the amount of time needed to de-escalate students suffering from emotional problems and allows them to return to the classroom feeling refocused and ready to complete work. The work at this school supports the potential benefits of non-verbal communication through animal-assisted therapy by reducing the child's stress level and the time spent calming and refocusing the child (Giest, 2011).

Animals have developed the ability to understand humans on a deep level. They can understand facial expressions and gestures that even some humans are unable to interpret (Prothmann et al., 2005). Animal-assisted therapies are becoming more common, likely because of the ability of animals to decipher human emotions non-verbally (Prothmann et al., 2005). The animal's purpose in the counselling setting is to create a therapeutic and safe relationship. In animal-assisted therapy, the animal facilitates the development of a relationship with the client and their counsellor thereby, relieving some of the client's anticipated fear and anxiety (Athy, 2005; Chandler, 2012; Dhooper, 2003; Friesen, 2009).

The ability to recognize and utilize laughter is a form of therapy and animals can often be the source of that humor (Beck & Meyers, 1996). Acting as a confidant, the animal will in turn help increase the amount of verbal communication with the counsellor. This will assist with the forward movement of therapy (Athy, 2005). The child may feel more comfortable with an animal present because it represents something familiar in a potentially unfamiliar environment (Sable, 1995). This could also explain why some children do not show the same attachment to animals if they do not have experience with animals (Sable, 1995). Dog owners are known to benefit more from the use of dogs in therapy (Beck & Meyers, 1996). A study conducted by Melson et al., (1991) found evidence to support that attachment to one's pet can increase perceived competence. However, it was not possible in Melson's study to determine whether or not greater self-esteem was correlated with pet ownership. Animals make for a more comfortable environment allowing children to feel more comfortable faster and communicate with the counsellor more openly

Dogs have been found in different studies to decrease an individual's level of stress allowing for improved care. It has been suggested that dogs provide more security and

companionship than other pets and can act as stronger buffers against life's stressful events (Siegel, 1990). Children respond positively to the presence of a dog while in a hospitalization situation (Tsai, 2010). Furthermore, a study by Tsai et al., (2010) found that adolescents in a psychiatric setting responded well with a resident dog. The dog was reportedly viewed as a friend and therapist as well as a comfort and distraction (Tsai et al., 2010). Animals also have the ability to improve the ease of basic life functions, such as opening doors and retrieving items, for those with special needs (Beck & Meyers, 1996). Many studies have found that individuals change their behaviours when in the presence of animals (Prothmann et al., 2005). Some improve their social interactions and have less isolating behaviors. This ability to improve social behaviors has been observed in autistic children (Obrusnikova et al., 2012; Prothmann et al., 2005). These improved social interactions continued after the therapy had ended (Prothmann et al., 2005). These studies have shown that dogs can be used as a buffer for stress in a multitude of different settings, as well as with individuals with complex needs.

It is well known that animals' unique relationships with humans can help individuals in ways that other humans cannot (Sable, 1995). Many studies have shown that the relationship between a human and an animal can not only enhance the relationship of the therapist and the client, but also be beneficial in lowering the client's anxiety (Athy, 2005). A few reasons that animal-assisted therapy has been effective in reducing anxiety in a therapy setting, are that the animal creates a less threatening environment by portraying an element of safety for the client (Athy, 2005). The animal that is trained for therapy can act as a transition between conversations and sessions, while still providing unconditional love and acceptance to those present (Athy, 2005). With the presence of a trained therapy dog, anxiety may dissipate at a faster rate (Athy,

2005). The dog's helping nature helps to alleviate an individual's anxiety in a way that humans may not be able to facilitate.

Anxiety and other mental health issues are ongoing issues in today's classrooms. Only 20-50% of youth access services for mental health problems (Hall, 2011). The school setting has the capacity to reduce the social stigma that tends to accompany the treatment of mental health (Hall, 2011). However, the school setting can also have a negative effect on children's anxiety levels. Some school settings can cause anxiety as a result of separation from parents, apprehension and concern surrounding social interactions with peers, and stress over academic achievement (Hall, 2011). Anxiety can lead to a decreased ability to perform physically and cognitively due to an increased perception of danger and risk (Athy, 2005). This elicits fear and leads the individual to want to fight or flight, or freeze and avoid to escape the cause (Athy, 2005). Changes to the school setting by incorporating the use of a dog in the counseling office could lead to a decrease in the anxiety of students and help mitigate the negative body reactions which are often caused by stress and anxiety.

Studies have shown benefits of using dogs to decrease anxiety levels in children. In a study conducted by Prothmann, Bienert, & Ettrich (2006) children suffering from anxiety disorders showed more fear in communication and contact with other humans than when interacting with dogs. Those suffering from anxiety disorders also interacted with the dogs less often than those suffering from anorexia, bulimia or autism but for longer periods of time (Prothmann et al., 2005). The participants suffering from anxiety disorders had the longest period of time spent actually petting the dog in comparison to the other participants (Prothmann et al., 2005). The children with anxiety disorders had an interaction style that showed less fear towards the dog and petted the dog as a self-relaxing tool (Prothmann et al., 2005). Anxious child

participants were more apprehensive of human social interactions but once comfortable because of the dog, and conversation had been initiated, they held the longest conversations with the people present (Prothmann et al., 2005). The therapy animal's consistent presence helps to stabilize the social environment and provide consistency for clients struggling with anxiety related to changes in their surroundings (Athy, 2005). This study by Prothmann et al. (1005) provides strong evidence for the use of dogs in reducing children's anxiety.

Animals can be useful for teaching appropriate social interaction and they can be helpful at home to provide support and comfort for children when confronted with peer issues. Animal-assisted therapy can be seen as more beneficial for boys when working with issues involving nurture (Beck & Meyers, 1996). Boys typically learn the importance of nurturing others through the observation of animal interactions (Beck & Meyers, 1996). Melson and Taylor (1990) looked at the differences between kindergarten boys and girls with and without pets at home. They found that parents of children with pets reported fewer behavioural problems and the teachers reported higher performance at school. Melson et al., (1991) looked at children's degree of attachment to their pets and their correlating social issues. They found that the older children who showed higher attachment to their pets were more likely to retreat to their pets for comfort and support when confronted with peer issues (Melson, Peet, & Sparks, 1991). These studies show that children may benefit from having a pet at home and the degree of attachment to one's pet might be a factor in predicting whether a child will find comfort and support in that pet.

Attachment to pets and the consistency of pets in an individual's life has been shown to have positive results. Research has shown that an individual's attachment to his or her pet continues throughout life (Sable, 1995). This attachment is a large part of an individual's emotional well-being and highlights the potential benefits of using animals for mental health

therapy (Sable, 1995). In a survey looking at family pets through the lifespan and their contribution to the social well-being of their owner, a young woman answered that two of the most helpful things in dealing with her anxiety were her dogs and her sister: “[When I had] panic at night, my dogs [were the] only things that helped. I sat on the floor with them. [They’re] just being there” (Sable, 1995 p. 337). These studies provide some evidence that anxiety levels are lowered in the presence of a dog.

While dogs are not able to reduce anxiety in all situations there are still other benefits to having them present. Tsai’s (2010) study looked at the effects of animal-assisted therapy on the state anxiety, cardiovascular responses and medical fear of children in the hospital. In this study, standing blood pressure was shown to be reduced by the presence of a dog with long lasting effects. However, there was no significant difference in state of anxiety for the children who received animal-assisted therapy compared to those who did not. However, the study showed that animal-assisted therapy may be useful in helping them cope with the initial transition to the new setting by reducing blood pressure. Tsai (2010) draws the conclusion that animal-assisted therapy is more effective at decreasing some physiological stress than a visit by a person. Tsai (2010) also predicted that there would be more visible results in more stressful situations. Studies have also shown the effectiveness of the dog in alleviating stress caused by visiting the dentist through simply allowing patients to sit with a dog prior to having their teeth worked on (Sajan, 2015). Horses have also been used to help heal emotional stresses in veterans dealing with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)(Campanella, 2015). The War Horse Project in Pembroke, Ontario, pairs soldiers suffering from PTSD with a horse to help them heal. Working with a therapist, veterans learn from the horse’s ability to startle and then move quickly to a place of recognizing there is no immediate danger. Therapists are using this innate ability in horses as a

model for helping veteran's deal with their PTSD reactions (Campanella, 2015). These studies show that even if anxiety and stress is not reduced by the presence of a dog, there may be other benefits by decreasing physiological stress.

A dog in the counselling office can have positive effects on the counselling relationship. Friedmann et al. (1983) confirm that blood pressure and heart rate can be reduced in the presence of a pet. In the study conducted by Friedmann et al. (1983) blood pressure and heart rates of children resting and talking in a restful state were examined. In this study different size and breeds of dogs were used, revealing that these factors do not affect the results on heart rate and blood pressure. The dog was simply present in the room and the child did not talk with or touch the dog. Friedmann et al. (1983) suggested that the presence of a dog in a room while a therapist is working with a client can cause less anxiety. Blood pressure levels when speaking to and stroking a pet were seen to be generally lower than when conversing with another human. The hear rate and blood pressure levels were not found to be much different than if one where to be resting quietly. It was also found that the effects of having a pet present were more drastic when the pet was present for the entire session and not brought in half way through. It is thought that this could be due to the environment being less threatening when an animal is present for both the researcher and the participant, affecting the overall levels of anxiety and stress, which supports the findings of Lockwood that having an animal present in a picture makes a room more inviting. Having animals present in a therapy session normalizes the setting and creates a calming effect for clients, especially those suffering from anxiety (Athy, 2005). Friedmann's (1983) study supports that the simple presence of a dog has positive therapeutic results.

Animals are not only beneficial in reducing anxiety in children. It has been reported that animals can reduce the anxiety of college students of all different ages (Beck & Meyers, 1996;

Bell, 2013). Dhooper (2003) conducted a study to see if animal-assisted therapy reduced anxiety in college students. Dhooper (2003) looked at the difference in anxiety reduction between having a dog present in group therapy compared to no dog. While the scientific findings of the experiment did not demonstrate the dog had a substantially positive impact on anxiety, participants did make comments during follow up interviews that the dog made them feel more comfortable and at home (Dhooper, 2003). This shows there may be some other positive effects for having a dog present in group therapy.

Pets can create a feeling of safety regardless of whether or not the situation causing the anxiety for an individual is real (Dhooper, 2003). One study showed that animals elicited a calming affect with Alzheimer's patients (Dhooper, 2003). Alzheimer's patients who still lived at home with a companion animal experienced less verbally aggressive behaviour themselves as well as less feelings of anxiety (Dhooper, 2003). The decrease in these behaviours would consequently cause less stress for the caregivers of these individuals (Dhooper, 2003). Animals can act as a distraction by diverging the individual's attention away from the stimuli that causes their anxiety (Dhooper, 2003). Pets can distract from both rational and irrational fears and triggers.

Animals act as a buffer during stressful situations (Dhooper, 2003). As stated by Siegel (1990), the ability of pets to act as buffers between humans and stressful events is documented through less doctor visits during periods of stress. In a study conducted by Hansen and Messinger (1999) children two to six years of age were observed with and without a dog present during a physical examination by a general practitioner. Throughout the observations, their heart rate and temperature were not measurably different among the two groups but their observed

behaviours were notably different. Those with the dog present showed less behavioural distress than those without the dog present through video observation (Dhooper, 2003).

Pets have been said to be a defense between humans and stress or illness. Therefore animals are known as a stress management practice. The mere presence of an animal has been connected to the decrease in physiological arousal as well as decreased anxiety and depression (Dhooper, 2003). In a study by Allen, (2003) stockbrokers were randomly assigned to one of two work conditions: with a pet and without. When in a stressful situation, those in the group with the pet showed lower increases in blood pressure, than those with no pet over a six-month period. Roux and Kemp (2009) also state that many authors have reported the reduction of stress, anxiety and depression through the use of animal-assisted therapy.

Petting live animals can reduce anxiety levels. According to Friedmann et al. (1983) there is psychological evidence that anxiety can be decreased by the presence of an animal. They stated that they may create a less threatening situation (Friedmann et al., 1983). Shiloh et al. (2003) conducted a study that consisted of a controlled experiment that was developed to look at the effects of animals on state anxiety. They also included in their study the different effects that real and fake animals as well as cold scaly and soft animals had on the participants (Shiloh, Sorek†, & Terkel, 2003). They took into consideration what the participant's views towards animals were. Their findings showed the participant's anxiety levels were lower for those that pet real animals as opposed to the fake ones (Shiloh et al., 2003). It was also found that it did not matter what type of animal it was whether a shelled turtle or a soft cuddly animal, both had anxiety reducing effects. They also concluded that both animal lovers and non-animal lovers had their anxiety levels lowered through the act of petting animals (Shiloh et al., 2003). A Child has a higher likelihood to succeed in a counselling relationship if they feel less anxiety while in the

counselling setting (Athy, 2005). If petting any animal can reduce anxiety then having an animal in a counselling office can increase the success of the therapy.

Animals can be utilized in many different therapy settings. Animal-assisted therapy programs have been developed to cater to different populations including children and adolescents with problems that are both behavioural and mental. A certain amount of anxiety symptoms are natural and normal. They will fade as children develop and grow (Athy, 2005). Anxiety can become more of a problem when feelings of fear are heightened and exaggerated causing children to feel a greater amount of perceived threat. This increases their symptoms of anxiety, in a non-threatening situation (Athy, 2005). Research is beginning to show that having a pet enhances quality of life; however these benefits are very difficult to assess scientifically (Sable, 1995). While the use of animals in therapy is beneficial, the evidence is still being collected to support the use of animals in different therapeutic settings.

The concept of a pet being a family member is important to keep in mind when working with individuals who have a pet. The loss of a pet may cause anxiety along with depression, grief, and anger through the mourning process (Sable, 1995). It is important to discuss a client's pet when taking into account their family because pets are considered to be a part of the family and can play an important role in an individual's life (Sable, 1995). Their interest in animals allows for the discussion of certain issues surrounding loss and change as well as the possible grief suffered from the loss of a pet (Sable, 1995). Often people are reluctant to seek help for feelings of grief surrounding the loss of a pet where they would not have the same fear over the loss of a loved one. Often the death of a pet can elicit the same feelings and emotions as when they lose other family members (Sable, 1995). The loss of an animal can also resurrect past feelings of loss suffered (Sable, 1995). It is important not to forget that animals can also

experience anxiety, separation and loss feelings and this should be taken into consideration (Sable, 1995). When working with pets it is important to consider the role that the pet plays in the situation.

Chapter 2 – Dog-Assisted Therapy in School Counselling

Dogs in the counseling office may improve and expedite relationship building between a counsellor and client by reducing anxiety in children entering a counselling environment. This could in turn benefit counsellors by enhancing their overall efficiency and productivity in the school. In this chapter I am going to explore the use of dogs in a school counselling setting. The comments that follow are primarily my own thoughts and opinions formed from findings in the preceding review of relevant literature.

Working with children in a school setting can create different anxiety-provoking situations for the child. Some of these include: separation from parents, social interactions and academic pressures. When a child is experiencing regular anxiety, the idea of meeting with a counsellor can increase these feelings. It is not abnormal for individuals to experience regular amounts of anxiety prior to meeting with a counsellor. This natural anxiety is a common issue for school counsellors during initial intake with new clients. The counselling relationship is of vital importance and is necessary for the success of the counselling process. In building the counselling relationship it is important to create a welcoming and safe environment. This environment needs to be one in which the student feels comfortable seeking guidance and assistance for various personal challenges and struggles. Having a dog present in the counselling office could facilitate and expedite this relationship building process.

Not only might dogs in the counselling office help with the process of breaking down initial anxiety barriers but the dog could perhaps also help in maintaining and growing the counselling relationship. Having the dog present in the counselling office may normalize the setting and create a calming space allowing for reduced anxiety (Athy, 2005; Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, & Messent, 1983). This can be general anxiety or anxiety that

surrounds the particular counselling topic. The level of comfort that is created by having a dog present may be all that is needed for that student to begin to trust the counsellor. This trust is something that all counsellors aim to provide for their clients while it is also something that is naturally difficult to create in a short period of time. Most individuals are resistant to people they do not know. Dogs have the innate ability to allow this process to happen more naturally and smoothly as people feel at home when they are in the presence of a dog (Dhooper, 2003).

Dogs in the counselling office could act as a catalyst in both verbal and non-verbal communication. As an elementary school counsellor, I find that some children are hesitant to open up and verbalize their problem and some will avoid the problem all together. With a dog present, these students may feel comfortable enough to discuss these difficult topics more freely. Therefore a dog in the counselling office can result in the increased emotional availability of the students. Children will be more likely to share their feelings if they feel safe and trust the counsellor. This may not happen right away but over time the dog can assist with the process that is already taking place between the counsellor and the client.

The presence of dogs can decrease an individual's heart rate and have an overall calming effect (Friedmann et al., 1983). In a school counselling office there are times that students enter the office, in an elevated state of anxiety, anger, fear, or worry. The cause of the student's emotional state could be a result of something that happened at home, in the classroom, or on the playground. Having a dog present in the counselling office and allowing the student to pet the dog or even just sit with the dog can help calm the student, perhaps faster than using verbal communication. This could benefit the counsellor and the student in being able to address the trigger that lead to the initial elevated state. The classroom teacher also benefits, as the student should be able to return to their classroom in a state that is more appropriate for learning. If the

initial trigger event took place in the classroom there would then be the potential for the issue to be rectified. Overall, a child has a higher likelihood to succeed in a counselling relationship if they feel less anxiety while in the counselling setting (Athy, 2005).

Just as having a dog present allows for the students to be more comfortable it also allows the counsellor to experience more comfort. This added comfort could allow for the counsellor to enhance their ability to present themselves as inviting and empathetic towards the student. In a similar way that dogs can read an individual's body language so can children. If a dog is present in the counselling office the counsellor consequently is more relaxed and comfortable. When the counsellor is in this state, it allows for a higher level of comfort to be projected through their body language adding to the therapeutic environment. The presence of a dog in the therapeutic environment is powerful.

There are several steps involved in incorporating a dog into a counselling setting. The dog would be trained and certified so that they are rendered as qualified to provide the type of services needed in a counselling setting. It is integral that the therapy dogs be qualified because people often make the mistake of adopting imported rescue dogs with the assumption that they have been assessed for temperament and behavioural issues (Ledger, 2015). The owner's assumptions result in the adoption of dogs with their own phobias, anxiety, fears, hyperactivity and aggression issues (Ledger, 2015). As this is a growing issue, it is important to be aware that these dogs would not be beneficial in a therapy setting.

In an ideal situation, the dog would be present in the school part time to give the dog regular break times which gives the counsellor the ability to prioritize the use of the dog in his or her schedule. As an elementary school counsellor, in many school districts, you are not at one school for the entirety of the week and instead you are split between a few different elementary

schools. I would suggest that ideally a counsellor would have a dog present for part of the time spent at each different school. This would allow time to get administrative work done without a dog and then utilize the dog in counselling with students for the remainder of the time. By only incorporating the dog at certain times, it would allow the counsellor to see students who suffer from dog allergies or are afraid of dogs without the dog present. It's important to recognize that not all children will respond well to having a dog present and this should be considered before incorporating a dog into therapy.

There are many great opportunities for a dog in a school setting. Having a dog present in the school would allow the counsellor the opportunity to provide educational classes for students surrounding dog safety and communication. This might involve explaining what non-verbal communication looks like in dogs and consequently how a human should safely approach a dog. The counsellor could use this opportunity to teach about body language used by humans and what our different facial expressions say about our feelings. In doing this, the school counsellor would be assisting with students' safety both in working with the counselling dog and when they encounter dogs in the community. Teaching about non-verbal communication is a very valuable skill and a key aspect in our own human social skills. This social skill development is part of the core health curriculum at different grade levels.

A dog in a school setting is not only valuable in the counselling office but also in the classroom. A counsellor can use a dog as a form of alleviating entire classes of some of their academic anxiety. The school counsellor could take their dog into different classes, such as a math class. This math class could be providing stress for some students; if the dog were to attend the class periodically it might have a positive impact on reducing the students' anxiety. Once these lower levels of anxiety have been observed the teacher and counsellor could arrange

scheduling to have the dog present when a test is administered. In this time, students would also be able to come over and pet the dog and take a break during their test as a tool to lower their test anxiety. This would allow students to perform better on their tests. This is one example of how dogs can alleviate stress in a classroom setting.

While there are many positives to having a dog present in a school setting there are also potential barriers. Some students may have allergies to dogs and not be able to be around the dog. If these allergies are so significant the dog may not be able to be present in the school or certain parts of the school in order to ensure the child is safe. This process would need to be decided upon and discussed with school administration before bringing the dog into the school setting. Some students may have a fear of dogs; this could be a problem or an opportunity for those students to meet a dog in a controlled and safe environment. This setting could allow for them to potentially overcome those fears. These students experiencing fear in the presence of dogs would benefit from the lessons taught surrounding a dog's non-verbal communication. Some students may have been bitten or experienced other forms of trauma as a result of a dog. In these cases the presence of a dog in the school could be a trigger for these individuals and may want to be reconsidered or addressed with the particular students and their families before moving forward. While these are all possible negatives they are not necessarily permanent barriers to the potential of dog-assisted therapy in schools. With the right procedures and policies, these barriers can be overcome.

The presence of a dog in the counselling office will allow for a more fluid conversation. If the school counsellor were to have a dog present in their office it would allow for a natural topic to assist with the conversation flow. This conversation piece would alleviate potentially

uncomfortable moments. While helping to keep conversation moving forward, a dog may also bring an added value to the moments of silence involved in the counselling process.

Dogs have many benefits in the school counselling office. How they are utilized depends on the skills and needs of the school counsellors themselves. It is through this individualization of the dog-assisted therapy that the role of the dog is decided. The dog could be used as a tool to teach social skills, a topic of conversation in the counselling process, to create a welcoming therapeutic environment, to reduce anxiety for student clients, and as comfort for the counsellors themselves. How one counsellor might use a dog in their practice may not be plausible for others. In this chapter I have outlined some of the positive uses of a dog in a school counselling office and how one might incorporate these into their own practice.

Chapter 3 - Conclusion

There have been many studies done that support the benefits of using dog-assisted therapy in the school counselling setting. In these studies, dogs are used in many different settings including counselling offices, hospitals, care homes, colleges and schools for children with behavioural needs. There still remains a need for future research to look at the use of dogs in public elementary schools. In chapter two, I explored what the use of dog-assisted therapy in practice as an elementary school counsellor might look like.

In review of relevant research, the benefits of dogs in a therapeutic setting were highlighted. Dogs create a strong emotional bond and connection that promotes security and well-being (Obrusnikova et al., 2012; Sable, 1995). Dogs are a valuable tool in teaching and reinforcing both children and adolescent non-verbal communication skills and pro-social person-to-person behaviours (Prothmann, Albrecht, Dietrich, Hornfeck, Stieber & Ettrich, 2005). The animal's purpose in the counselling setting is to create a therapeutic and safe relationship. The child's anticipated fear or anxiety can be alleviated through the use of animal-assisted therapy facilitating the development of a relationship with the client and their counsellor (Athy, 2005; Chandler, 2012; Dhooper, 2003; Friesen, 2009). The level of care has been seen to improve through the use of dogs in different studies through their ability to decrease an individual's anxiety. More success is seen with children in a counselling relationship if they are less anxious (Athy, 2005). It is because of animals' unique relationships with humans that they are able to help individuals in ways that other humans are unable to (Sable, 1995). These different benefits of dogs in a therapeutic setting support the use of dogs in a school counselling office.

Dog-assisted therapy in a counselling office can be used in many different ways. In chapter 2 I explored the potential uses of dog-assisted therapy in a school counselling office. The

dog's innate ability to build strong relationships in an expedited fashion is something that is particularly useful as school counsellors are often bound by time constraints. The use of a dog to alleviate the student's anxiety levels allows for more success in the counselling process. The use of dogs in an individual, group and class counselling setting are also explored. Incorporating dog-assisted therapy may speed up the counselling process and benefit the fluidity of the counsellors' overall goals and outcomes. Therefore, dog-assisted therapy not only benefits the client but also the counsellor. Dog-assisted therapy can play a very large role in a school counselling setting.

Several benefits of the use of dog-assisted therapy have been presented in this paper. However, research is lacking in the study of dog-assisted therapy in public elementary schools. With future research focusing on the use of dog-assisted therapy in a public elementary school setting, the findings would provide counsellors with the needed evidence and support to implement a dog into their own practice. While individuals are able to draw from other relevant research the strength of research done in the exact setting is invaluable. With the results of future studies one would be able to confidently pursue the use of dogs in their own school counselling office.

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