

LITERATURE REVIEW

HOW CAN ANIMAL ASSISTED THERAPY IMPROVE SELF-CONFIDENCE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN INDIVIDUALS WITH ANXIETY-RELATED CONDITIONS?



“Intimacy with a beloved pet or special animal makes millions of people feel as though they win the lottery every day” (Becker & Morton, 2002).

Written by: Larissa Kutny, Canine Comprehension tutor.



The bond between human and dogs is one that has been long documented, however, the potential health benefits of being in the presence of dogs is an area that is seemingly growing in very grounding and promising research. Research has shown that dogs can reduce stress and provide a sense of connection during difficult times, and the prevalence of therapy dogs and animal assisted therapists is growing; particularly in school environments. The intention of this literature view is to explore and analyse the role of therapy dogs in improving self-confidence and communication skills in young individuals with anxiety-related conditions, which are prevalent amongst children in Australian primary schools.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020), 8.2% of Australian school-aged children were diagnosed with ADHD, making it the most common disorder for children in that aged group. Furthermore, the second most common disorder for this age group were anxiety disorders, which affects 6.9% of Australian Children. A large proportion of children who suffer from ADHD or attention-deficit disorders also suffer from anxiety, and vice versa; making these two conditions a target area for teachers, parents, and therapists alike (Shuck et al., 2018).

Given the documented impact dogs can have on wellbeing, schools are increasingly adopting therapy dog programs as a way of providing emotional and social support for students. The role of a therapy dog is to react and respond to students in their environment, under the guidance of their handler. A dog's ability to interpret and respond to human facial expressions and body language makes them an excellent candidate for providing emotional support to humans (Fine, 2019). The purpose of using a dog in AAT is for the dog to act as a social lubricant between students and the therapist, with the aim being to improve a person's social, emotional and cognitive wellbeing. Grove & Henderson (2018) suggest that a healthcare professional who utilises a therapy dog may be viewed as less threatening, potentially increasing the trust and connection between the student and therapist.

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The psychological benefits of AAT in those with anxiety-related conditions are well documented, and are largely based upon the human-animal bond. The strength of the human-animal bond in improving mental health is supported by research which shows that dogs have the ability to reduce cortisone levels in humans, which is the hormone typically increased during both acute and chronic stress periods (Beetz, Uvnäs-Moberg, Julius, & Kotrschal, 2012, p. 2). In addition to this, being around a dog in a therapeutic environment may also increase attachment responses which trigger the release of oxytocin; a hormone that increases trust in other humans (Beetz, Uvnäs-Moberg, Julius, & Kotrschal, 2012, p. 2). This research suggests that as cortisol is reduced and oxytocin is increased, students may become more relaxed and willing to communicate with their therapist or peers, which may be a valuable tool for improving self-confidence and communication skills in those with anxiety-related conditions.

For the large number of children in primary schools which have anxiety-related conditions or display signs and symptoms of anxiety, AAT may be a suitable intervention for helping these children feel safe in their learning environment and becoming comfortable around their peers. Research by Friesen (2009) and Grove & Henderson (2018) explores the benefits of therapy dogs in the classroom, and talks about the ability for AAT to teach empathy and interpersonal skills, teach individuals social skills, and improve individual's skills to pick up social cues; which is imperative to human relationships. AAT's can utilise this information to help students understand the importance of communication and social skills, and also help them to understand how their behaviour may affect others (Schuck et al., 2018). For students with anxiety-related conditions and attention-deficit disorders, the teaching of these life-long skills is imperative, and sets students up for success in both their academic and everyday lives.



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Larissa Kutny

Written by: Larissa Kutny, Canine Comprehension tutor.

Larissa is a Osteopath and a pre-service teacher. Larissa combines her experience in Osteopathy alongside her passion for teaching and animals. Her enthusiasm, positive attitude, energy and flexible use of teaching methods and philosophies are all assets to her role as Tutor for Canine Comprehension.

Larissa is committed and dedicated to her students, ensuring they are well prepared for lifelong learning.

Her therapy dog, Lulu is pretty awesome too!

About Canine Comprehension.

We provide a calmer school environment through our tailored Dog Assisted Learning programs. We know that being able to provide a positive environment that is calm increases positive behaviours throughout the classroom, school and family environments.

With early intervention, we can help your child to process the emotions they are currently feeling and help them to understand them in a safe environment. Our highly trained tutors and dogs offer a connection that some children are craving and can help to create surroundings that are conducive to learning.

Our programs and individualised tutoring are goal oriented, evidenced based and innovative. We aim to create an environment that offers conducive learning experiences to a broad range of students whether in the classroom or at home.

See our website and social media pages to learn more about us.

