

LITERATURE REVIEW

WOULD AAT BE EFFECTIVE AS AN INTERVENTION TO ENGAGE STUDENTS WITH SCHOOL AFTER THE DECLINE IN WELL-BEING FROM COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS?



No matter which country that you live in, anywhere in the world, Covid-19 during 2020-21 has had an effect on normal, everyday life. Our everyday work, routines and lifestyle turned upside down whilst stress and anxiety on the rise from inability to source basic supplies and concern over becoming infected means our basic desire for survival is threatened (Hunjan and Reddy 2020). Those who have been particularly affected include our students who have had to continue their education from home due to school closures during lockdown. UNICEF (2021) highlights the health, social and emotional suffering that has been inflicted that will have a lasting effect in the growth and development of our children in the future. Anxiety and stress from being at home, along with the withdrawal of services and support that schools provide have further increased the gap for many students.

Written by: Lisa Collard, Canine Comprehension tutor.

On return to onsite learning, schools will have a big task managing and supporting children for education outcomes and social deprivation that occurred. They will need to find ways to identify and support children who are suffering with depression, loneliness, disconnection and possible abuse, neglect or family violence. This will be especially challenging for teachers who have themselves been impacted by juggling teaching online and caring for their own families. King (2018) reminds us that all people need to love and be loved in order to have self-esteem and self worth. We don't learn or connect without feeling strength within ourselves. What about those students who have been so disconnected that they can't be reached by human interaction, baring in mind that the mistrust in humans has likely grown during the pandemic period? Ratschen ,et al. (2020), present this question and resolve to solve this suggesting that human relationships with animals are the solution to providing a connection for loneliness and mental health.

According to Friedmann (Fine 2019), 'pets can positively affect people's health by decreasing loneliness and depression, decreasing anxiety and sympathetic nervous system arousal'. This is supported by Beetz et al., (2012) who studies the effects of HAI on hormonal indicators of stress such as cortisol, and on neurotransmitters such as epinephrine and norepinephrine. Oxytocin (OT), the 'bonding' hormone is often realised when in the presence of those we love most and with animals. Among the acute effects of OT is the stimulation of social interaction. It increases eye contact, empathy, face memory, trust, social skills, positive self-perception, and generosity and decreases depression (Beetz etc al., 2012). Oxytocin effects may be triggered with a once off meeting meetings with animals, but stable relationships with animals such as pet ownership or a regular programme such as Canine Comprehension where the dogs visit on a weekly will be linked to more strengthened and long lasting effects due to repeated exposure to OT.

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This may vary with the individual's attitude towards animals causing variation in cortisol reduction when touching a dog. Animals may be distressing to some students and have an adverse effect on the reduction of stress or increase of socialisation within the group. The introduction of an animal to the group may cause the student to withdraw further and potentially cause embarrassment in front of peers. As with any therapy model, an alternative may be more effective (Fine 2019). However, the survey conducted by Ratschen et al. (2020), of 5,323 people highlighted that only 15 people didn't like animals at all suggesting that the majority of cases would benefit from the interaction with an animal. Canine Comprehension also reports of many children changing their minds about dogs and having meaningful interactions when a steady program supporting HAI was in place.

Touch is a human need and assists in the connectedness to other human beings. During the lockdown periods, many adolescents did not receive human touch as they would in normal social interactions with their peers and intimate relationships. Overuse of technology for home schooling and relying on social media for human connection expands the gap between humans and nature. This is leading to screen addiction and withdrawal symptoms when devices are taken away.

With many of the adolescent's relationships breaking down during the covid lockdown due to now fault of their own, distance, 5km zone restrictions, exercise time restrictions and restrictions on numbers of people that may gather, some students will feel very lonely. When lockdown is released, students are still required to be 1.5m away from each other, further increasing their physical disassociation with each other. "Animals allow the client to give and receive touch in a safe way" (King 2018). King also cites that dogs know instinctively who needs touch and who needs space allowing students to give and receive the love that is crucial to their healthy development. Touch can be crucial during times of grief and loss (King 2018). Students are grieving the significant events and rites of passage that were lost during this time. Birthday parties, school socials, graduation ceremonies, adequate education support and sense of normality in learning. They feel they have missed out and lost significant parts of their education, social life and development. Holding a dog can give the sensory feedback to assist in the alleviation or reduction of grief.

Returning to school will have different expectations for each student. Some students will be looking forward to returning to the social relationships and classrooms whilst others may be reluctant or school refusers. Janssen et al., (2020) reported in their study that relationships between parents and their children had often remained the same or improved in many cases of high socioeconomic family groups where they were least affected with unemployment or ability to source resources. The adolescent's reported boredom (22.9%), missing social contact with friends (17.7%), irritations with family members (13.1%), homework (12.3%), and worry about the health of others (6.4%) as their top difficulties. This study was taken during the first lockdown in 5-6 week of lockdown with Dutch families with no existing mental health issues and high socioeconomic circumstances. Those families that suffered the pain of unemployment, low socioeconomic status and family mental health issues or family violence may not have had the same balance in relationships. Some students regardless of their Covid experience will still avoid school as being home has become their certain or safe place.

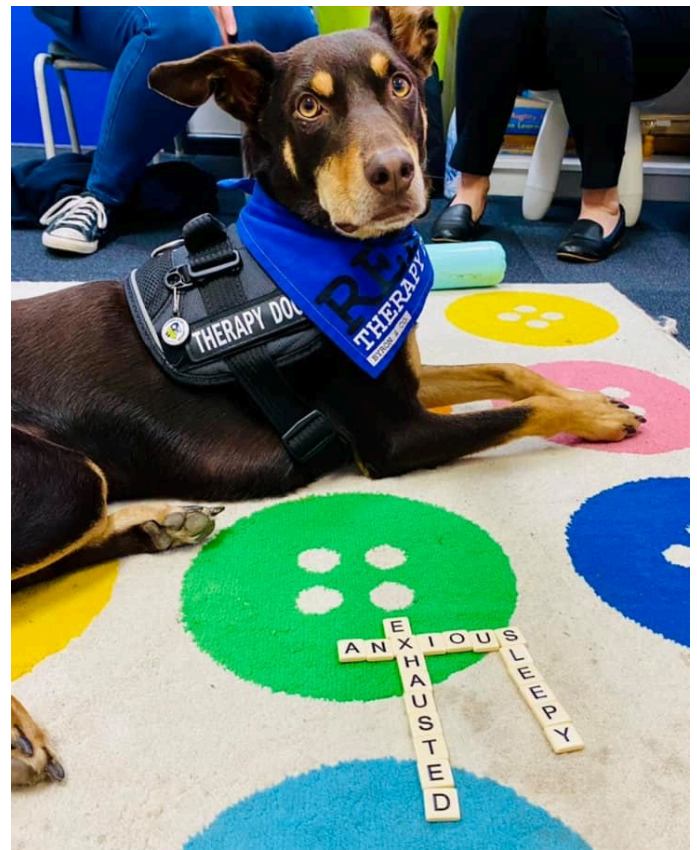
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To regain rapport and trust in the school system may be difficult for those who prefer to study from home. The presence of animals may encourage rapport and trust for the therapist or tutor who is ultimately the professional that can initiate assistance (MacNamara et al., 2019). Schneider and Harley (2006) asked college students to rate the trustworthiness of two different psychotherapists. They presented a video of each professional one with the dog present and one without. The participants, especially those who were reluctant to psychotherapists, were more open to share personal information and generally more satisfied in the session when the dog was present. Animal assisted reading programs have shown improvement in student readiness to participate in reading intervention whilst the dog was present and providing a stronger connection between the teacher and the student. (Basette and Dougherty 2016). Once the barriers are down learning can take place allowing the best opportunities for the student to thrive (Fine 2019).

As our students return to school and resume their education, many will be suffering a form of PTSD requiring support from other human beings who have been suffering as well. Normal programs and routines may not be introduced for a while such as school choirs or swimming programs. For some students, being at home was less stressful as they didn't need to navigate complete social relationships and thrived by working independently at their own pace. For many, returning to school is welcomed so that they may see friends again if their technology and access to the internet allowed them to stay in touch. However, there will be a percentage of students who will not be willing to return to school, who feel so disconnected and have witnessed their self worth plummet. This is a pivotal time where these students require reengagement, support, friendship, understanding and connection. If this cannot be provided by peers and many proponents cannot be supplied by school staff then why not use the vast proven benefits of AAT and assist the student to engage fully in an education and life that is their right.



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Lisa Collard

Written by: Lisa Collard, Canine Comprehension tutor.

Lisa has always loved helping students feel better in their own skin. She believes everyone has something to offer, something to contribute and are able to learn and grow in their own way.

As a tutor, she believes it's our job to give them a positive and engaging opportunity to do just that!

Lisa has worked in Early Learning, Primary, Secondary and Special schools, and in private settings with children and adults. The last few years has seen me creating and presenting short courses and workshops based on reducing stress, managing mindset, developing confidence, mindfulness and self-belief.

Canine Comprehension is proud to have her on our team!

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.

