



Animal Assisted Activities as an Adjunctive Therapy for Justice Involved Individuals

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ABSTRACT

Forensic mental health practitioners face unique barriers to treatment implementation and adherence when collaborating with justice-involved individuals. Animal Assisted Activities (AAAs) have the potential to address some of these barriers. Animal Assisted Activities, when used in conjunction with established evidence-based practices, provide a unique method for addressing Criminogenic and non-criminogenic treatment needs along with increasing treatment engagement. This paper outlines potential avenues in which AAAs can be incorporated within the Risk, Need, Responsivity (RNR) model of assessment and treatment of criminal behavior.

Keywords: Mental health; Adjunctive therapy; Socialization; Training

INTRODUCTION

Overall, the utilization of Animal-Assisted Activities (AAAs), most commonly in the form of Prison Animal-Based Programs (PAPs), is not a new concept. Traditionally, Prison Animal-Based Programs take the form of dog training programs where prisoners care for and train dogs to increase their likelihood of adoption or receiving service animal training. According to Cooke and Farrington, in 2016, over 290 dog training programs were implemented in various U.S. prisons [1]. The most common prison-based animal programs are the community service and service animal socialization models. The community service design typically consists of prisoners caring for an animal, typically a canine, 24/7 and conducting basic obedience and socialization training with this dog, with the goal of adoption. Service animal socialization programs are similar, although the outcome is likely that these canines will complete more intensive service dog training and are called Animal Assisted Activities [2]. "Animal-assisted activities provide motivational, educational, and recreational opportunities to enhance the quality of life. These activities are delivered by a specially trained professional, paraprofessional, or volunteer in partnership with an animal that meets specific criteria for suitability" [3,4].

Proponents of AAA programs cite multiple benefits to justice-involved individuals, such as "contributing to rehabilitation by strengthening the bond to society (adherence to social norms and expectations) and improving psychological functioning". A recent meta-analysis looked at the efficacy of Prison Based Animals Programs and yielded promising results, including reduced criminal recidivism, and increased social-emotional functioning [5-7]. Despite the promising results, a lack

of robust research examining AAAs has led to difficulties providing an evidence-based rationale for practitioners and correctional stakeholders interested in implementing Animal-Assisted Activities with justice-involved individuals. This article outlines how AAAs can be implemented in conjunction with the evidence-based assessment and treatment model for justice-involved individuals called the Risk Need Responsivity Model [8,9].

RISK NEED RESPONSIVITY MODEL OF CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR

The Risk Need and Responsivity Model is a theory of criminal behavior that provides a framework for clinicians in assessing and treating criminal behavior [10]. "As suggested by its name, this theory is based on three principles: 1) the risk principle asserts that criminal behavior can be reliably predicted and that treatment should focus on the higher risk offenders; 2) the need principle highlights the importance of criminogenic needs in the design and delivery of treatment; and 3) the responsivity principle describes how the treatment should be provided". To further expand on this theory's principles, its creators outlined eight Criminogenic needs that account for areas of the offender's life associated with an increased likelihood of criminal behavior if not addressed in treatment [11]. These needs include Previous Offending, Family/Marital, Companions, Pro-Criminal Attitudes/Orientation, Education/Employment, Leisure/Recreation, Alcohol/Substance Use, and Antisocial Behavior patterns. It should be noted; that while the RNR model states that while these factors should be addressed as relevant to the client in treatment, Non-

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criminogenic needs may often also need to be targeted. Common Non-criminogenic needs targeted in treatment include Self Esteem/Concept, Mental Health Conditions, Trauma and Attachment Styles, Physical Health, and Empathy [12].

UTILIZING AAAS TO TARGET TREATMENT NEEDS

As outlined by the RNR model of criminal behavior, interventions should target both Criminogenic and Non-criminogenic treatment needs. Engagement in Animal-Assisted Activities has the potential to uniquely address multiple treatment needs. For the purpose of this paper, the Criminogenic Needs of Education/Employment and Pro-Criminal Attitudes will be discussed. In addition, utilizing AAAs to address Non-criminogenic needs will also be discussed [13].

EDUCATION/EMPLOYMENT

The first need to be discussed is Education/Employment. The RNR model states that interventions aimed at addressing the employment needs of offenders should focus on "increasing employability and satisfaction of employment upon release (Justice Inspectorate, 2020)." Many studies have linked stable employment upon release to desistance from crime. Multiple studies have shown that community service and service dog socialization programs have demonstrated positive effects for participants regarding increased rates of desired employment upon release [14]. In a study by Currie in 2008, "89% of participants who completed the program reported experiencing practical outcomes such as learning responsibility, skills related to employability upon release, and improvement of the prison atmosphere."

The increased utilization of animal-based programs would provide justice-involved individuals with opportunities to gain essential job skills such as time management, maintaining a schedule, communication, interpersonal skills, and trade-related skills, which may make them more marketable for jobs working with animals [15]. Additionally, the potential impact of these programs on employment post-release is seen in studies conducted by Furst in 2006. These results showed that "33.8% of incarcerated individuals involved with PAPs reported working in animal-related jobs upon release, and 23.9% reported receiving a job referral upon completion of the program." Finding employment upon release can be incredibly difficult for offenders, and often these individuals do not have a consistent work history or job skills before incarceration. While correctional facilities offer job training programs, there are limited spots available to incarcerated people. As a result, many prisoners may not have the opportunity to gain the experience needed to be successful with employment upon release through these more traditional programs [16].

PRO-CRIMINAL ATTITUDES

Many individuals who encounter the legal system, which results in incarceration, often have experienced multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in their lifetime. In a study conducted by the Compassion Project, 97% of their sample of incarcerated individuals had at least one ACE, with a startling 78.1% having four or more ACEs (Compassion Prison Project, n.d.) The chronic nature of these individuals' traumatic experiences commonly causes attachment and identity difficulties. While attachment literature concerning criminal offending is still in its infancy, there is evidence that insecure attachment in childhood is a risk

factor that can increase the likelihood of criminal behavior. The most famous study on this topic comes from the Cambridge Delinquency study, which found that the offending group was more likely to have received parenting characterized by poor supervision, harsh discipline, and their parents were more likely to conflict with each other. The study went on to outline how these factors may contribute to risk, but parental care stood out as the largest mediating factor in a child's development [16]. Animal-based programs in prison can target insecure attachment styles and negative identity attributes such as being "bad" or "unworthy" that individuals may experience due to abuse or neglect [17,18].

Often individuals who experience multiple ACEs and an unstable home environment as a youth turn to offending to survive or become involved with these activities to feel a sense of community and connectedness to others around them. Pro-social behaviors were likely not encouraged or reciprocated by those around them. The introduction of an animal can provide a blank slate for these individuals to receive reinforcement for pro-social behaviors. Zilch-Mano and colleagues found a close correspondence between people's attachment orientations in human-pet relationships and their attachment orientation in human-human relationships [19,20]. In addition, experiencing unconditional love, whether from an animal or human, is something these individuals may not have experienced. The experience of the unconditional love of an animal can begin to show individuals that they can give and receive love in a healthy and pro-social way. This ability to connect with another living being can positively impact identity and lay the groundwork for repairing damaged attachment patterns caused by previous life events [21,22].

Animal-based programs target Antisocial Cognitions and have the potential to increase the internalization of factors related to a pro-social personal identity [23]. "Assisting the dog or the community may help people perceive themselves as someone who can take responsibility and do good for others, thereby conforming to the rules and expectations of society, which is associated with resistance because it helps build an alternative "anticriminal" identity". In addition, animal-based programs and interventions increase pro-social activities with others while incarcerated. Numerous studies have shown that involvement with animal-based programs while incarcerated is associated with improvements in empathy, communication, motivation, and social interactions. Like the modeling effect animal interactions can have regarding attachment, animals can also allow incarcerated individuals to engage in enjoyable pro-social activities by themselves and others. Often individuals who participate in animal-based programs are provided with segregated housing, which means they are more likely to interact with peers in prison who exhibit pro-social behavior [24,25].

NON-CRIMINOGENIC TREATMENT NEEDS

While Animal Assisted Interventions are not a standalone treatment for any mental health condition, this intervention can increase the benefits associated with more standard treatment models, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, in addressing mental health or other treatment needs. The utilization of animals in treatment is associated with a decrease in stress and anxiety, an increase in the production of oxytocin, and a reduction in cortisol [26]. This reduction of psychological distress can potentially increase one's ability to engage with traditional therapy methods [27,28].

Evidence also shows that utilizing Animal Assisted Interventions can address treatment needs associated with substance use disorder. "While the exact rates of inmates with Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) are challenging to measure, some research shows that an estimated 65% percent of the United States prison population has an active SUD. Substance use disorders can add an additional challenge for practitioners working within a forensic or correctional setting. However, using animals in conjunction with evidence-based practice has the potential to address some of the barriers associated with treating individuals with substance use. An example of this is demonstrated in a study conducted by Contalbrigo and colleagues in 2017 [29]. In this study, the treatment group received 1 hour a week of dog-assisted group treatment for twenty sessions in addition to the standard curriculum at the prison where they were housed [30-32]. The control group received only the standard curriculum. The authors found that the treatment group (N=12) statistically improved in the areas of social skills, cravings, anxiety, and depression compared to the control group (N=10) as measured by the SCL-90. This study also posed that these benefits are due to increased motivation and engagement in the treatment group [33,34].

INTEGRATING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Based on the evidence outlined above, Animal Assisted Activities appear to be a viable adjunctive therapy to traditional evidence-based theories such as the Risk Need Responsivity model and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. The utility of Animal Assisted Activities lies in their ability to address treatment goals based upon the client's areas of risk, need, and responsivity. Animal Assisted Activities support evidence-based treatments for justice-involved individuals, such as Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Motivational Interviewing. These activities support treatment goals based on Criminogenic treatment needs, such as increasing treatment engagement and motivation for treatment, providing opportunities to address antisocial thinking patterns, providing an environment that supports pro-social engagement, and increasing skill sets to aid in employment upon release. In addition, Animal Assisted Interventions complement therapies that focus on Non-criminogenic risk factors such as overall mental health and substance use [35].

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The evidence base surrounding the field of Animal Assisted Activities with justice-involved individuals is still developing. The current literature suggests that this intervention has the potential to support rehabilitation and address treatment needs when combined with evidence-based models. While the use of Animal Assisted Activities alone does not appear to be sufficient to elicit change, this intervention has the potential to provide a valuable tool for mental health practitioners working within a forensic setting. Based on this, further research into the benefits of this intervention with incarcerated individuals is recommended to gain additional understanding of this intervention.

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