

Animal Asisted Therapy in the School

Guideline



Prepared by the European Erasmus+ project “A Magical Dream: Animal Assisted Therapy for disabled students”

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1. Project Description

In schools, we have some students with whom we are in difficulty to handle. For example; the ones who need special training, have behavioural disorder and are in difficulty with learning, have hyperactivity and concentration disorder and whose academic success is low. The project “A Magical Dream: Animal Assisted Therapy for disabled students” is focused on students who have different problems and difficulties in the school and their teacher and parents in order to help them to overcome their problems and be successful using methods and principles of Animal assisted therapy. Our aims are to share experience, knowledge, methodology and the best practices in Europe, to develop occupational talents of different teachers, to compare animal-aided education practices in the schools of project partners and also to share different solution methods and to spread out the best practices.

The main goals in the project are:

- To develop the sense of dependence and assuming responsibility of disadvantaged students, to cause them to perceive human-animal bond, to teach responsible pet proprietorship, to increase their concentration , care and participation, to decrease their worries, to solve their problems about learning, to produce more effective and lasting solutions in order to decrease their bad behaviours.
- To give students a hand in order to get rid of the troubles that impress their psychology badly, to make them individuals who have an active role in society by developing their knowledge, ability and talent.
- To spread out the results in Europe level by introducing new ideas to the founding’s.
- To explore and describe best practices in education, to prepare a guide of animal-aided education practices and to make other schools use these practices.
- To develop an awareness in order to generalize animal-aided education practices.
- To develop the occupational experience and talent of our teachers in animal-aided therapy and practices.

Partners on project are Josip Matos Primary School, Vukovar, Croatia, Inonu İlkokulu, Toroslar-Mersin, Turkey, Istituto Comprensivo Di Tavagnacco, Italy, Szent Imre Katolikus Általános Iskola és Jó Pásztor Óvoda, Eger, Hungary and Primary school „Braka Miladinovci”, Dobrusevo, North Macedonia.



2. Introduction to Animal Assisted Therapy

Numerous research show that interaction between children and animals is very beneficial for children's psychological, emotional, social and physical state. In the last few years, animal-assisted education practices attracted increased attention all around the world and took place in many schools. Animals are extensively used as class sources and they are supporters of education who are included in lesson plans and training programs. School consultants, psychologists, guidance services and teachers use animals smoothly and they help children cope with their physical and mental troubles and gain motivation. Today we have a lot of programme that utilise animals for interactions with humans and provide some form of benefit to the person interacting. One of them is Animal Assisted Therapy.

Animal Assisted Therapy means utilising interactions with animals to assist in a therapeutic technique. It is a part of Animal Assisted Interactions. Animal Assisted Therapy must be delivered by or run in conjunction with the expertise of a professional therapist, so it is very rarely used in the School; often we apply other kinds of Animal Assisted Interactions. In this Guideline we will be more focused on those kind of Animal Assisted Interactions. Animal Assisted Interactions (according to Bush, A. i Zarosa, M., 2017, Animmal Integration in Education Guidelines, Elista Education Centre, Ireland) including:

- Animal Assisted Therapy
- Animal Assisted Education (or Learning)
- Animal Assisted Intervention
- Animal Assisted Activities

2a. Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT)

According to IAHAIO (2013) "...Animal Assisted Therapy is delivered and/or directed by a formally trained (with active licensure, degree or equivalent) professional with expertise within the scope of the professionals' practice...". Animal Assisted Therapy is complementary to many therapeutic methods. Goals within such a programme relate rehabilitation and the treatment of symptoms of disability, injury or ailment. Animal Assisted Therapy must be delivered by or run in conjunction with the expertise of a professional therapist, so if it implemented by other experts who do not have therapy backgrounds and recognised qualification, "Animal Assisted Therapy Facilitator" is a title that is much more appropriate than "Animal Assisted Therapist".

Animals can be used in physical therapy for making improvements in balance, co-ordination, muscle and nerve rehabilitation; in psychotherapy as initiators for self-awareness, personal perception and subconscious behavioural patterns; in behavioural therapy promoting behaviour modification and helping learn cause and effect, and occupational (or social) therapy where they may promote independence in activities, development of friendship and bring people with similar interest together.

2b. Animal Assisted Education (AAE)

Animal Assisted Education is usually goal focused to academic progression with emphasis on tasks with animals that help in comprehension of standard academic subject areas. According to IAHAIO (2013) “Animal Assisted Education (AAE) is a goal orientated, planned and structured intervention directed and/or delivered by educational and related service professional...The focus of the activities is on academic goals, pro-social skills and cognitive functioning...”.

Animal Assisted Education provides opportunities for facilitators (education professionals) to be creative with novel ideas for learning that may be more abstract in nature. This will suit many learners, but particularly those that struggle with more academic learning formats.

2c. Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI)

“Animal Assisted Intervention is a goal orientated intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals in health, education and human service (e.g social work) for the purpose of therapeutic gains in humans....” (IAHAIO, 2013).

In Animal Assisted Intervention programmes the goal is regularly based upon prevention, e.g. violence, suicide, self-harm, separation, ect. Intervention activities promote modification of behaviour and/or thoughts and feelings. Depending on the AAI programme there is likely to be a significant integration of AAT of psychological, behavioural and social rehabilitation.

2d. Animal Assisted Activities (AAA)

Animal Assisted Activities are “... informal interactions/visitations often conducted on a volunteer basis by the human-animal team for motivational, educational and recreational purposes. There are no treatment goals for the interactions” (IAHAIO, 2013).

The AAA definition includes an emphasis on “no treatment goals” and delivered by volunteers. In Animal Assisted Activity the goal is the activity itself. Within these activities there will be opportunities

for physical therapy as the client has to work on their hand strength and co-ordination, for another client the same activity may offer social (or speech) therapy as they have to ask a helper something, for another it may be an educational/learning exercise. So, although this Animal Assisted Activity includes many therapeutic and educational opportunities because they are not the specific goals nor are outcomes being measured the 'session' is purely task or activity based in nature.

3. Benefits of Animal Assisted Therapy

There are many different benefits of interacting with animals for all people. They are categorised into 6 types (according to Bush and Zarosa, Animal Assisted Interactions, 2017):

- Physical - Those are benefits to the body and the working of the body. These benefits do not have to be rehabilitative, but often are, as animals are utilised in animal assisted physiotherapy type programmes
- Psychological- Those are benefits to the mind. They help improve people perception of themselves, what they think. Those benefits would be the goal in Animal Assisted Psychotherapy or Counselling.
- Social - Those are benefits that come from interacting. Social benefits may be speech based, but they can also be eye contact, following instruction, comprehension of spoken language for example.
- Emotional - Those benefits relate to feelings. The emotional benefits of animal interaction can have an effect on mood, and subsequently often a knock on effect on behaviour, psych perception and physical health.
- Behavioural - Those benefits relate to actions. Often people have to modify their own behaviour to interact effectively with animals, and sometimes animals mirror behaviour, helping people to learn more about themselves.
- Cognitive - Those are benefits relate to learning. Cognitive function can be enhanced through engagement with animals, and animals enable opportunities for learning in novel ways.

Animal Assisted Interactions usually have more than one type of benefit, but if the goals of the programme are clear then the benefits will most likely be more prominent in one area compared to the others.

4. Principles of Animal Assisted Therapy

Before starting Animal Assisted Therapy in the school, animal or animals to be used in the sessions must be carefully assessed and suitably prepared. Following this basic procedure will establish effective Animal Assisted Interactions that are professionally prepared, beneficial to children, ethical to animals and evaluated in a way that can give objective analysis that promotes further inclusion of animal integration programme in education.

4a. Selecting Animals for Animal Assisted Interactions

Just like humans, animals also have 'personalities' often referred to as 'temperaments'. Temperament, just like personality is the combination of an animal's genetic characteristics and tendencies as well as the consequences of their learnt experiences. Not every animal is suitable for being in an Animal Assisted Interaction.

Animal Suitability is ultimately determined by two factors; genetic predisposition and environment, including experiences and learning. Temperament and the behavioural traits associated with it are predominantly affected by stability and sociability. Stability in animals relates to their sensitivity and reactivity to stimulus in their environment. Do they get very excitable, nervous, or scared? Sociability refers to their interest, motivation and desire to interact with or be around people.

4b. Assessing Potential Animals

One of the initial stages of preparing for an Animal assisted Interactions in school environment is the selection and assessment of animals. A responsible facilitator will carefully and systematically assess the intended animals in various aspects prior to initial use and then subsequently prior to each use following that. Full assessment of the animal will minimise risk of injury to children and will not compromise the animal's well-being.

Assessment need to be:

- General Selection Assessment (temperament suitability)- involves making sure that the animal is of suitable health for the integration programme. A veterinarian should give a thorough physical examination of the animal to make sure the animal is in no physical pain or distress. The two main dimensions of temperament; stability and sociability should also be comprehensively assessed.

- Specific Environment Assessment - specific environment is most likely to be the school, the classrooms, the playground and any area in the school that the animal may work or visit. In the first instance the animal should be brought to the school environment at a quiet time, giving them the opportunity to look at school specific items and smell the array of new scents. Progressively stimulus should be increased within the assessment process to include all the normal school items, and finally including children.
- Task Assessment- animals should be assessed in line with the tasks or activities included. Any novel stimulus that is intended to be used in the session or for specific tasks needs to be assessed also in respect of the animal.
- Daily well-being assessment - Daily health checks ensuring the animal is fit for 'work' on a given day. It include checking the ears, eyes and mouth for normal colouration and the absence of discharge. Checking the coat for sores, cuts or signs of ectoparasites and ensuring breathing is at a normal rate. Faeces should be normal and the animal's appetite, movement and general behaviour as it would regularly be.

4c. Animal Well-being

Animal in the School should be given 5 freedoms (according to Universities Federation for Animal Welfare, published 1994):

- The freedom from hunger and thirst
- The freedom from pain, injury and disease
- The freedom from fear and distress
- The freedom from discomfort
- The freedom to express normal behaviour

Although understanding the requirements of animals (the five freedoms) is important for their all-round well-being, the ability to recognise when an animal is not comfortable or stressed in an environment or situation is also vitally important for a facilitator to recognise and understand as it will also affect the well-being (safety) of child or children involved in the interaction.

4d. Animal and the Associated Risks

Animal interactions are not without risk. Even a non-stressed animal may accidentally scratch, knock over or tread on the foot of an unsuspecting child. Risks significantly increase though when an animal experiences stress or if activities or interactions deviate from the intended or prepared. For each programme, session and activity a risk assessment document should be prepared to indicate the potential risks to the children or child engaging in the integration programme and interaction.

4e. Code of Practice for Animal in the School

A code of practise should be prepared for animal interactions within the school environment. Such a code should be the guidelines in which a facilitator or other responsible person ensures the ethical use of an animal and the health and safety of children participating in the programme. They are likely to include the pre-planning steps, for example permission from school management, confirmation of children's involvement from parents, aims and key goals of the integration programme whilst leading to the preparation required in respect of the animal (selection, assessment, physical and psychological preparation) and the environment (equipment, facilities for the animal in school etc). A code of practise should also include steps for suitable preparation of children, a briefing, washing of hands, appropriate clothing and general well-being/suitability for animal interactions on that given day.

5. Animal Assisted Therapy in the School

An animal in the school can be used as aids in teaching all subject areas, languages, mathematics, science, geography, religion, physical education. Benefit for school based interactions are most cognitive, but can also be focused on behaviour, encouraging calm, social skills, communication and team work...

Animal Assisted Interactions can be prepared for an individual student or for the whole class/group during one or several sessions. Teachers/ facilitators makes session plans. It is a document in wich they wright key goals, subjekt, activities and tasks to achieve the goals. It is necessary to collect objective and measurable data during the sessions to evaluate the outcomes of the sessions and whole session, and to prepare subsequent sessions.

5a. Planning a Goal Focused Sessions

Facilitators plan sessions which are based on goals for their students to achieve. In one session should be no more than three key goals. Once a facilitator has decided on what key goals an animal assisted interaction session will focus on, activities or tasks which will offer opportunity for progression in relation to the key goals should be decided upon. Filling a water bowl, bucket or drinker can be an activity that can be based around physical goals; lifting, fine motor skills, co-ordination and balance, get the students to do it in pairs it also becomes about team work and co-operation, give them a larger volume of water to which they must fill a small container it may promote problem solving or the activity can even work on reading skills if they are given a care card, or mathematics if a specific volume of water is required.

5b. Preparing Animals for Effective Use

Where the key goals are husbandry based; feeding, providing water, cleaning out, attending to general health, housing and well-being, the 'preparation of the animal' may be minimal. Facilitator has the opportunity to provide fun, novel and creative sessions effectively utilising the chosen animal(s) and still working on key goals. Facilitator should always check and assess the animal on a daily basis prior to interactions within the integration programme.

If the session goals will be promoted by having the animal interact with an item or piece of equipment then some training may be required. Training an animal to behave in a certain way during a session can add fun or enhance the human animal relationship being built, it can also add further challenges, or even spark emotional reactions not necessarily otherwise exposed.

5c. Measuring Session Outcomes

The outcomes of tasks and activities should be measured. It will be an objective 'score' and progression can be easily assessed between sessions.

Where the key goals are psychological, emotional or behavioural objective assessment can be more difficult, but finding a measure as suitable as possible is an important role of the facilitator. In session that has key goals based around physical benefits; flexibility, co-ordination and core strength key goals can be simply measured. The activity may be to hook 10 items off of ten cones whilst on the horses back. It is easy to measure this activity in respect of the, how many items out of ten did they hook? The measure starts to become a little more complicated when recording includes 'first attempt',

'second attempt' and so on, but the facilitator should still aim to record this in an objective manner. In the next session or future session when the activity is repeated, or a progression of the activity (i.e. 15 cones or smaller cones) some comparison and level of progression (or regression) can be recorded.

Where the key goals are psychological, emotional or behavioural objective assessment can be more difficult, but finding a measure as suitable as possible is an important role of the facilitator.

5d. Evaluating Educational Sessions Integrating Animals

Upon completion of a session a facilitator should complete an evaluation form, a personal record of the student(s) achievement in relation to the key goals. In planning future session this evaluation form will remind the facilitator what has already been achieved by the student. A trend within sessions should exist so that activities are repeated or progressed at an appropriate level. Maintaining activities in this way will aid the comparison of measurable outcomes and will enable student ability, hopefully improvement to be recorded.

As part of the evaluation the facilitator should also evaluate factors or bias that may have influenced the session. In the example used above of hooking objects from cones whilst on horseback, a suitable progression to promote flexibility would be to make the cones smaller, encouraging a greater reach, but if the 10 items on the cone are different to the items in the previous session then there is a bias affecting the results. The facilitator must also evaluate the session for the effectiveness of the animal or animals included. Did the animals aid activities promoting the key goals? Did the animals distract from activities of key goals? Did the animal show any signs of discomfort or stress?

Evaluation sheets can then be utilised by a facilitator to generate an end of programme report, this may take the simple summary format.

6. Literature

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