

Partnering to get Paws: Preparing a Pediatric Client for a Service Dog

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Background

Under the supervision of a faculty Occupational Therapist (OT), OT students are providing therapeutic intervention in the Ithaca College Occupational Therapy clinic to an 11 year old boy. The client is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and developmental delays. He experiences difficulty with fine motor (FM) skills, communication skills, self-regulation skills, and play skills. He is currently applying and interviewing to receive a service dog. OT sessions are focusing on skills for interacting with a service dog by including interaction with dogs in training through the Guiding Eyes for the Blind program on campus.

According to Odendaal (2000), interaction between humans and animals provides an environment where the two species can positively interact and meet each other's emotional needs without facing societal stigma. Sams, Fortney, and Willenbring (2006) note that children's attention and motivation increased during therapy when interacting with the animals. Animal assisted therapy has been found to improve communication and social skills (Chitic, Rusu, and Szamoskozi, 2012) while decreasing anxiety in children (Goddard & Gilmer, 2015). This directly impacts OT sessions by promoting positive engagement in activities while providing psychological, physiological, and emotional benefits (Goddard & Gilmer, 2015, (Odendaal, 2000).

Methods

Our client is seen for 45 minute, weekly OT sessions. Labrador puppies are incorporated into the sessions and used as both a means of achieving fine motor goals, and an ends in preparation for interviewing for a service dog. The client's caregiver remains present during the sessions to help interpret the communication signs the client uses with the student therapists and with the dog.

The dogs are used to promote finger and hand extension by petting with a flat, open hand. The client is instructed and given hand over hand assistance, when needed, to pet the dogs. These fine motor skills can be generalized to other areas, specifically a touch screen communication device that requires finger isolation and extension to push the buttons.

The client enjoys feeding the puppies and this is used as a therapeutic activity to work on the client's grasp. Small treats are placed in the holes of a peg board and covered with pegs. The client then lifts the pegs to retrieve the treats in order to feed the dog.

The dogs are also used as an ends in therapy because the client needs to walk ten feet with the dog while holding the leash in preparation for a service dog interview. The client holds the leash in one hand and walks next to the dog and the student therapist as she counts the steps aloud. During and after therapy sessions with the dogs, the client exhibits signs of positive emotions, including squealing, clapping, and smiling.

Results

By engaging with the dogs during therapy sessions, the client is developing skills needed when interviewing to receive a service dog. The first goal of the client being able to hold the dog's leash while walking with the dog for at least 20 feet applies to taking the dog out into the community. The second goal of the client using a pincer grasp to give the dog treats while visually attending to it allows the client to care for and play with the dog. It will also address the development of grasp patterns that can be generalized to other activities, such as writing skills and self-feeding. The final goal is the client will independently pet the dog five times during a session using an extended hand, promoting a greater motor repertoire. The fine motor and socio-emotional observations noted during sessions further support the existing literature on animal assisted therapy.

Conclusion

The use of animal assisted therapy profoundly influences our client. His motivation and enthusiasm increase, as exhibited through his smiles and interactions with the dog. The dog provides the opportunity to use a variety of unique interventions such as walking, feeding, and playing with the dog. Furthermore, the dog is a living organism and thus provides the client with a variety of feedback, which enhances the client's understanding of emotions. By utilizing dogs as an intervention strategy, he is more likely to reach his goals and be an active participant while at school, at home with his family, and engaging in other occupations that are meaningful to him.

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