The Path to Obtaining a Service Dog

Purpose:
During the summer 2017 session we worked with an 11 year old client in the pediatric OT clinic with diagnoses of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), chromosome 7 abnormality, and global developmental delays. Our focus with this client and his family was to obtain an assistive animal. We discovered that he more actively engages in activities with animals, particularly larger dogs, as found in Fung and Leung’s study (2014), “there was an increase in verbal social behavior.” There is currently a wide gamut of research regarding assistive animals, specifically service dogs. Prior to working with the client, we researched the benefits of service dogs, including decreasing the stress of the caregivers of those with ASD and improving the behaviors of the child (Wright, et al., 2015). A case study (Mackinnon, 2015) found that children with Autism communicated and demonstrated a deep connection with their service animals. These results also indicated that the dogs were perceived to foster increased safety for the child as well as enhancing social interaction, companionship, and sensory support. Parents experienced a sense of support because they believed the dogs shared some of the parenting burden (Mackinnon, 2015). Children with ASD communicated and demonstrated a deep connection with their service animals, and much of that connection seemed to occur regardless of whether language skills were present (Mackinnon, 2015). Our project focused on the applicability of the animal in regards to the client’s needs and motivational factors. As occupational therapists, we strive to improve the overall quality of life and create an inclusive environment for differing abilities. The purpose of our project was to advocate for a client with multiple needs in order to initiate a process that would positively impact their family dynamic and ability to participate in the community. Unfortunately, the family was lacking the time to complete the research needed to obtain a service dog. Our information allowed for a systematic understanding of the many opportunities available to them regarding service animals.

Process:
Our goal was to create a portfolio of service dog information to present to the client and the family. These organizations have all been accredited by an AOTA approved accrediting body to assure the quality of training of the dog. Over the four weeks, we had met with the client to examine his home environment and observe his behaviors. After the first home visit, we set out to fully research all the details regarding service dogs. This ranges from the types of dogs available to all of the organizations that were out there. Our research focused on the strengths and weaknesses of each type of assistance animal. The dogs are categorized as Service, Emotional Support, and Therapy Dogs. A service dog is a highly trained and personalized animal that performs specific tasks in order to foster independence. Emotional Support Animals (ESA) are not required to undergo any specific training as their main role is to provide emotional comfort to their owners. Conversely, a therapy dog requires extensive training in order to provide psychological therapy to an individual or group of people. We then narrowed down our findings, and created a portfolio to share with the family. Finally, we met with the family again to walk them through the portfolio and how it was organized. We explained each component and were able to explain what information was included in the portfolio and why.
Results/Product:
The final product is an organized portfolio in which we outlined various accredited organizations. It is divided into four main sections, including: types of dogs, organizations, summary of organizations, and journal articles. Additionally, we explored the steps needed to acquire a service animal and the possible impacts it would have on the client as well as the family. This resource is easily accessible due to its caregiver friendly language and organization.

Conclusions:
This portfolio provides peer reviewed research as well as opportunities for access to service animals. It is client-centered and has the ability to connect the client to the community in order to foster their physical, emotional, and cognitive development.

References:


Disorders, 45(8), 2531-2540.