

Animal-Assisted Therapy in Pediatric Palliative Care



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KEYWORDS

- Animal-assisted therapy • Pediatrics • Palliative care • Interventions • Suffering
- Evidence-based practice

KEY POINTS

- Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) may benefit children receiving palliative care through addressing physical, emotional, social, and spiritual issues.
- Rigorous longitudinal studies of AAT are needed as we strive to reduce the suffering of children with life-threatening conditions.
- Development, implementation, and evaluation of AAT evidence-based programs may be a powerful addition to conventional treatment.
- Benefits of ATT for adults include reduced anxiety, stress, depression, enhanced mood, increased socialization, and increased energy levels.
- Nonpharmacologic approaches to symptom management often decrease costs and noxious side effect.

INTRODUCTION

Children with life-threatening or life-limiting conditions and their parents, siblings, and friends often experience stress, loneliness, and anxiety. Families have identified stress, anxiety, pain, and separation as key contributors to low overall hospital experience ratings.^{1–3} Although families generally rate doctors, nurses, and other health care providers high on patient satisfaction surveys, they often rate the overall experience of hospitalization low.^{4,5} In the interest of improving families' experiences, a goal of the Institute of Medicine is for health care providers to focus on patient-centered,

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holistic care, which includes actions geared toward emotional support of children and their families to relieve fear, anxiety, and loneliness.⁶

Traditionally, anxiolytic therapies have been prescribed to assist in controlling anxiety in hospitalized children, but this therapy is often associated with high costs and harmful side effects, such as constipation and nausea.⁷⁻⁹ Therefore, the advent of nonpharmacologic approaches to manage anxiety and loneliness through complementary therapies has drawn attention from both consumers and the medical community.^{8,10} Approximately 40% of the US population uses complementary therapies, including meditation, deep-breathing exercises, yoga, massage, and diet-based therapies.¹¹ Complementary therapies used in conjunction with conventional treatment are intended to treat not only the physical manifestations of illness but also the emotional, social, and spiritual issues associated with disease, the very essence of palliative care.^{8,12,13}

The human-animal bond continues to be a topic of exploration in research, philosophy, and psychology. Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is considered to be a subset of complementary and alternative medicine because it adds to the treatment and affects the way a patient may experience symptoms.¹⁴ The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) estimates that 69.9 million US households own a pet dog, and 74.4 million own a pet cat.¹⁵ Veterinary researchers have found that benefits to pet ownership include an increase in social interactions and attention, improvement in mood, and extended life expectancy.^{16,17} Researchers have also found that being engaged with an animal decreases levels of the stress hormone cortisol while enhancing hormones such as oxytocin, dopamine, serotonin, and prolactin, which creates a sense of tranquility.¹⁸

BACKGROUND

A review of the literature through a systematic search of CINAHL, PubMed, Psych INFO, and Medline was the basis for the following synthesis of the use of AAT with children. Initial search terms included pet therapy and AAT, but more specific terms such as canine therapy and animal-assisted activities (AAA), and children, adolescents, and youth were then added to the search. Reference lists were used to conduct secondary searching for additional studies not found in the original review. The authors contacted Pet Partners and the AVMA for recommendations for additional information. Search results were limited to English, with no restrictions for dates, because the authors wished to include a historical perspective of AAT.

Therapeutic use of animals in association with symptom management has been practiced for thousands of years.¹⁹ Florence Nightingale documented positive effects of animals and noted that small pets are often helpful companions for the sick.²⁰ As a social reformer who was proactive and innovative, she used animals as companions for both the disabled and the infirm. Nightingale noticed that animals assisted with the healing process of soldiers wounded during action in the Crimean War.²¹ Soon afterwards, Sigmund Freud hypothesized that dogs had a "special sense" and believed that dogs could even judge the character of individuals. He owned 2 dogs and allowed one of them, Jo-Fi, to attend therapy sessions for the calming presence the dog brought to the session and the assessment of a patient's mental status.²²

As a child psychologist in the 1960s, Dr Boris Levinson speculated that encouraging emotionally challenged children to take care of pets had calming and therapeutic effects on them.²³ As the author of *Pet Psychotherapy*, Levinson noted that including his dog, Jingles, in therapy sessions helped children to be less resistant and decreased their anxiety during interactions.²⁴ One previously mute child even spoke to Jingles,

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