

Enhancing Secondary School Counseling with a Therapeutic Dog

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Abstract

Animals are increasingly being used for emotional support and therapeutic intervention in a variety of settings including, hospitals, nursing homes, schools, and prisons. Therapeutic animals can bring comfort to the ill, bereaved or lonely, and there are indications that owning a pet may positively influence an individual's health and well-being. Through anecdotes, the authors describe the use of a dog to facilitate counseling services in a secondary school counseling program.

Introduction

Most pet owners can attest to the emotional benefits of pet ownership, and historically animals have been lauded as having a positive effect on the well being and health of human beings (Parshall, 2003). However, the systematic study of the therapeutic benefits of animals is a recent phenomenon (Hooker, Freeman, & Stewart, 2002; Parshall, 2003). While much of the existing research on the use of animals or pets in the helping professions applies to medical settings, school counselors can benefit from the use of animals in their school counseling programs. In addition to presenting literature on animal assisted therapy, this article will describe a semester long project that utilized a therapeutic dog in a secondary school program.

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Animal Assisted Therapy Literature

Use of Animal Assisted Therapy with Adults

Animals have been used therapeutically with adults in diverse settings and for a variety of purposes, and the inclusion of animals in therapy and treatment seems to have a positive effect (Parshall, 2003). Animal assisted therapy has been effectively used to calm and comfort dementia patients (Laun, 2003), and provide stress relief for caregivers of dementia patients (Baun, & McCabe, 2003). Animals have also helped reduce stress for hospitalized psychiatric patients (Kovacs, Kis, Rozsa & Rozsa, 2004), and critical care patients (Miller, et al 2003). Animals have been effective in the reduction of recidivism and in the promotion of pro-social behaviors among prison inmates (Deaton, 2005; Strimple, 2003). These studies point out the facilitative effect animals can have with diverse adult populations. While the success of animal assisted therapy with adults is informative, the use of such therapy with children and adolescents is of particular interest to school counselors. The ability of animals to provide stress relief, promote pro-social behaviors in children, and facilitate helping relationships could potentially enhance the delivery of services within school counseling programs.

Use of Animal Assisted Therapy with Children

Animal assisted therapy as an intervention for hospitalized children and adolescents has been found to be effective. Kaminski, Pellino and Wish (2002) discovered that pet therapy relieved boredom and loneliness, normalized the environment and enhanced recovery for hospitalized children. Rathsam (2002) noted that interaction with dogs made children feel accepted and reduced their anxiety about upcoming medical procedures. Dog assisted therapy helped ease psychological distress for children and adolescents who were hospitalized for cancer treatments (Gagnon, Bouchard, Landry, Belles-Isles, Fortier & Fillion, 2004). In these hospital based studies, the calming influence of animal assistants enhanced the delivery of medical services. These calming effects seemed to enhance rapport and also appeared to increase a child's openness to treatment interventions.

The use of animal assisted therapy with disabled children has also proven to be helpful. Poleshuck (1997) recommended the addition of animals to occupational therapy with children and adolescents with disabilities. Heimlich (2001) used animal assisted therapy in a residential facility with severely disabled children and found positive effects. Nakanishi (1999) found that children with autism had increased levels of verbalizations, laughing and pro-social behaviors with a dog in therapy sessions when compared with plush toy facilitated and one on one therapy. Martin and Farnum (2002) also found that the addition of a dog to the therapy of children with pervasive developmental disorder resulted in more positive affect and more awareness of surroundings. Once again, the animal assistants augmented intervention strategies by assisting with comfort levels and rapport building.

Use of Animal Assistants in School Settings

Animals have also been used in school settings for both instructional and therapeutic purposes. Rud and Beck (2000) found that animals in the classroom have been used to teach specific science lessons, encourage pro-social behaviors and to facilitate the development of responsibility in children. Huber (2005) recommends the inclusion of animals in the classroom to teach responsibility, and Flom (2005) found the use of small animals helpful in promoting responsibility. Responsibility is a critically important developmental competency for children, and school counselors could coordinate with teachers to accentuate the concept of responsibility when animals are used during academic instruction.

Inclusion of animals in school counseling has enhanced the delivery of counseling services. O'Brien (1993) observed that children turn to their pets when troubled, and noted that the accepting demeanor of a dog mirrors the basic attending skills of the counseling process. By integrating a dog into individual counseling sessions, Burton (1995) found that rapport with clients was established quickly. Flom (2005) states that animals in the counseling session boosted self-calming behaviors in children, and Mallon (1994) found that the accepting nature of animals facilitated the development of a therapeutic relationship between children and the counselor. Trivedi and Perl (1995) also note that the presence of a therapeutic animal had a facilitative effect on clients, and Chandler (2001) indicated that animals in a school counseling program encouraged more students to take advantage of counseling services. Once again, animals appear to enhance rapport building and openness to counseling services.

Emotional Responses of Animals

While humans respond emotionally to animals, is the reverse true? Mammalian animals have been found to exhibit emotions (Bekoff, 2002.; de Waal, 1996; Goodall, 1986; Tangle, 2001). Also, humans and non-human animals share similar brain structures which are sites of emotional recognition and response (Tangle, 2001), and mammalian pets, especially dogs, remain loyal, dependable, attentive and even patient throughout their lives as they interact with their humans (Sussman, 1985).

While it is impossible to know an animal's internal state, counselors who have used animal-assisted therapy note the sense of unconditional love that seems to emanate from animals used in therapeutic situations (Parshall, 2003). Clients experience animal-assisted therapy as an interactive process, and Trivedi and Perl (1995) maintain that effective animal assistants are sociable animals that appear to seek out and enjoy interactions with people. Participants in the project described in this article all noted an emotional connection with the dog assistant. The clients and counselors involved believed that the dog exhibited compassion and sensitivity to human emotion. His demeanor was interpreted by clients as empathic and loving; therefore, the clients felt accepted and open in his presence and counseling experiences were enhanced.

An Animal Assisted Counseling Project

Newman-The Animal Assistant

Newman is a two year old male Pomeranian who was rescued from a puppy mill by his owner, a school counselor trainee. Upon rescue he was hungry, underweight and dirty. He is now happy and healthy and is being trained as a therapeutic animal by Hand in Paw, a Delta Society affiliated organization. Not all rescue dogs have the appropriate temperament for therapeutic service, but many do and Newman possessed all the basic qualities. According to the Hand-in-Paw organization (2005), therapeutic animals must be: healthy, obedience trained, controllable, non-aggressive, and accepting of handling. They must enjoy meeting new people and being held and touched by strangers. In addition they should be confident in new situations and polite around other animals.

Newman assisted his owner, a school counseling intern, with her counseling practice in a large and diverse high school in the southeast. Newman appeared to love his job and jumped eagerly into his carry cage on the mornings he went to school. The students and staff of the school enjoyed his presence, and the success of this project was due in a large part to a supportive administration and staff. Newman was considered a part of the educational team and students and staff members would pop into the counseling office and ask "Is Newman working today?" One student noted, as Newman met her at the door with his tail wagging, that Newman was the official greeter for the counseling office.

Individual Counseling

The clients reacted to Newman in different but beneficial ways. A female client who was new to the school and struggling with transition issues found Newman comforting. In a sense he was one of her first friends in the new school. Initially she was quiet and non-responsive, but when Newman was present at the second session she began to open up about her feelings and her difficulties adjusting to a new environment. The client revealed to the counselor trainee that she felt safe when she was holding Newman and that it was easier to talk when he was present. In this example, Newman facilitated the development of rapport and trust within the counseling process.

A male client, who was referred for peer rejection, found acceptance with Newman. As the student spoke about various teasing and taunting episodes, Newman edged closer until he was snuggled right up next to the client on the couch. While relating the most distressing aspects of his story, the client would reach over and pet Newman. The counselor trainee noted that Newman seemed to give the client strength to go on. This client made gains in assertiveness, self-esteem and friendship building. Newman seemed to pick up on and respond to the client's distress. By moving close to the client, Newman provided support and connection.

Group Counseling

Newman helped facilitate a counseling group that consisted of eight adolescent males who were referred to the counselor because of social skill deficits. The counselor trainee

introduced Newman and told the group about Newman's difficult start in life and his rescue from the puppy mill. Next the students reflected upon where Newman is now, how he has a happy life and how he works to help others. The concept of hope for new beginnings was emphasized, and students were asked to imagine what their new beginnings might look like. Newman became a living symbol of hope for this group.

The students noticed Newman's social skills. One student remarked "He likes everyone and everyone likes him". This opened up a discussion about the importance of openness and acceptance. The diversity in the group offered another opportunity for growth and learning. The students noticed that Newman greeted each person and didn't discriminate. One student commented, "He doesn't make assumptions about who we are, he just likes us". Students were encouraged to see if they could emulate Newman during the week (be accepting, attentive, open and friendly) and see what differences they noticed in their social interactions. During subsequent group check-ins, the students were able to relate instances where they emulated Newman's positive attitudes and behaviors.

The counselor trainee found Newman to be a major benefit in the group process. Newman was an instant ice breaker for the group. The group participants felt relaxed and happy as Newman provided a safe initial conversation topic that enhanced positive interactions between group members. As the group progressed, Newman consistently modeled empathy and compassion. He seemed to be specifically drawn to the group members who were discussing difficult issues; thereby providing support during the group. The counselor trainee observed that when Newman hopped into the lap of a quiet withdrawn student, the student instantly relaxed and joined the group discussion. Time after time, Newman facilitated the group process and cohesion while modeling pro-social behaviors. The counselor trainee believed that Newman was a vital element in the therapeutic success of the group experience.

Behavior Management Facilitation

Newman's presence in a remedial class became the catalyst for change for several students with behavioral problems. The students wanted to hold and pet Newman, but they were informed that loud voices and actions might startle Newman, and they could only hold him if they were quiet, gentle and working on task. The students were immediately compliant with these behavioral requests and patiently took turns holding and petting Newman. Using a solution focused approach, the counselor trainee was able to highlight the students' abilities to manage their behavior while Newman was present. The students were then able to transfer these more positive behaviors into other settings.

Supervision

Newman participated in a weekly counseling supervision group with his owner. The supervisor noted that Newman's presence in the supervision group enhanced cohesion and eased the tension of the counselor trainees. Newman was instrumental to the supervision process in one instance in particular. A counselor trainee became emotional as she related a difficult case, Newman walked across the group and leaned against her leg as she spoke. The trainee reported that Newman's presence calmed her and helped her as she processed her emotions. Enhancing

Implementation Suggestions

Using anecdotes, this article has described the use of a therapeutic dog in a secondary school counseling program. Since this project was not experimental there are limitations and the positive experiences of the school counseling intern and the clients cannot be generalized to other settings. However, given the existing literature, school counselors may want to implement an animal assistant program to augment delivery services.

Parshall (2003) states that practitioners should only use dogs that have been trained or licensed as therapeutic animals. Such dogs have passed screening for appropriate dispositions and have been obedience trained. Counselors interested in animal assisted therapy should consult the Delta Society website, (<http://www.deltasociety.org>) (2005) for information on affiliated organizations, resources and training in their vicinity.

Informed consent should always include the purpose and goals of counseling activities (Stone & Dahir, 2006); therefore, counselors should communicate how the addition of a dog to counseling and guidance activities would be of benefit to students. Parental permission forms are essential and should inquire about allergies or fears that the students might have. The dog must be current on his or her vaccinations and a copy of the dog's vaccination record should be on file. The strong support of the administration is essential for any type of animal assisted therapy (Heimlich, 2001), so counselors should relate to school administrators the potential benefits in integrating a dog into the counseling program as well as the precautions that will be in place to ensure the safety of the students. These precautions should include: use of a trained and healthy therapeutic dog, constant monitoring of the use of the dog and parental permission for students to participate in dog facilitated counseling activities.

This project illustrates through anecdotes how the integration of a dog into a secondary setting may benefit counseling with adolescents. While more research is needed on the efficacy of animal assisted counseling in school settings, the positive experiences reported by participants in this project have motivated the authors to continue working with Newman in school settings. This semester long project with Newman has been a wonderful and fulfilling venture for the supervisor, counselor trainee, school staff and most importantly the students. With an appropriately trained dog and school wide support, other school counseling programs, both elementary and secondary, can benefit from the use of a therapeutic dog in the provision of counseling services.

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