

Animal-assisted activity improves social behaviors in psychiatrically hospitalized youth with autism

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Previous research suggests that animal-assisted activities (AAA) can help with social skills in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This study looked at the benefits of AAA (with dogs) for 47 young people with ASD who had been hospitalized for mental health concerns. Some of the young people took part in a dog and dog handler interaction (AAA) whilst others took part in a new toy and toy handler interaction. The young people’s interactions were recorded via video and were coded using a tool specifically developed to capture interactions with animals. The results of this study showed that overall, social communication behaviors significantly improved for the young people who took part in the AAA compared to those who interacted with toys. Specifically, young people who had the AAA displayed more positive emotional facial expressions (e.g., smiling), talking, use of gestures, and looking at both adults and peers. In addition, those who had the AAA moved around more. These results suggest that AAA with a dog may help improve social communication behaviors in young people with ASD who are hospitalized for mental health concerns. We recommend that future studies look at how the benefits of AAA with a dog can impact the mental health treatment of this population.