1 The Importance of Animal Welfare in Animal-assisted Services

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Abstract

The domestication of animals by humans is grounded by a utilitarian approach. Most animal welfare and rights materials were written based on animals in agriculture, research, exhibition, and production. More progressive thinking has animals fulfilling the roles of family members and as helpers in healthcare and human services. While welfare currently describes the intrinsic value of animals, independent of humans, we may still be falling short based on how the *animal* experiences animal-assisted services (AAS). With this in mind, this chapter offers considerations for selection, preparation, training, and evaluation for AAS.

Introduction

Most animal-assisted services (AAS) providers have the very best of intentions when including animals in their session plans. For those who enjoy them, animals can elicit positive emotional states for humans via surges of oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin. These interactions are often romanticized using human language to describe human perceptions in print, social media, television, and movies. But are the selected portrayals telling the full story? Back in the real world, many animals are having a different experience. We see dogs in classrooms with children laying on them and the dog guardian boasting of how "bombproof" the dog is with the kids, but the trained eye can see a dog who is shut down. The classroom rabbit that struggles to escape a child's tight embrace, only to be accidentally dropped or thrown in the struggle. Horses may have learned helplessness as they are tied to fence posts with short leads so teens can express their feelings by painting on them. We hear of animals being unintentionally harmed by people who were not developmentally, cognitively, or emotionally appropriate for the interaction. And yet, most of these interactions could have been prevented. There is a growing body of knowledge about animal cognition and emotion that we can draw from to make better educated guesses about how they may experience animal-assisted intervention (AAI) interactions, environments, and activities.

The unconditional love from animals is frequently touted as the foundation for successful AAIs. However, the lines between animal welfare and anthropomorphism are often blurred. For example, if the human handler is enjoying an interaction with a patient in a hospital, it can be difficult for them to objectively view the dog's behavior and assume the dog feels the same way. With concerns of ethics, safety, and liability, AAS welfare must consider both participants (e.g. students, clients, patients) and the animals. We have the responsibility to be stewards to both.

Evolution of Welfare

Over the years, animal welfare has experienced significant evolution. Duncan (2019) describes that until the 17th century, animals had only instrumental value to humans and no rationality. The 1800s

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brought awareness that animals could suffer, so they gained intrinsic value. Then in the late 20th century, studies included what animals might feel, considering physical and mental well-being based on scientific structure and function, yet focused more on perceptions of stress.

The trail of progressive thinking is clear, but most of the welfare work has been from the utilitarian approach for animals used for agriculture, research, exhibition, and production. Modern academics and practitioners are deviating from the completely utilitarian approach and now contemplating the theory and practice of human–animal interactions and relationships. Animal welfare in the context of AAS is determined by the characteristics of the animal (Glenk, 2017; Enders-Slegers *et al*., 2019; Ng, 2021) and their perceived experience. AAS are specialty areas that require knowledge and skills in species, breed, and individual traits. In addition, the methods of preparation, communication, training choices, and how these all impact human–animal interactions with students, clients or patients are ultimately the responsibility of the handler.

Improving Animal Welfare with Selection Processes

The selection of a species for AAS should include consideration of the animal's biological make-up. While hedgehogs can be quite social, they are nocturnal, and do best with controlled temperatures. This is not conducive to typical business operating hours and it is difficult to control the conditions of an entire room to match their natural habitat. Turtles may be a good size option, but carry zoonotic risk factors, so handling may not be advisable for vulnerable client populations. Consideration for any species should begin with the investigation of scientifically established species-specific behavioral norms. Due to their popularity, we offer specifics as they pertain to dogs.

Understanding breed-specific traits of dogs can mitigate a lot of frustration. For example, dogs from herding breeds are athletic, energetic, and like to be busy. They are bred to be focused on keeping the herd together which may include heel nipping to navigate another in the right direction and to stay with the group. This may be an unfortunate outcome in pediatrics, but is it fair to try and train this natural genetic predisposition out of them? Is it fair to ask a "ball crazy" dog to work in a nursing facility where all of the residents have tennis balls on the bottom of their walkers? Should we be asking a dog with a fear of loud noises to work in a busy classroom? Handlers must realize that no amount of preparation can guarantee that any animal will necessarily like the job it is being asked to do, but it is less likely if we are asking them to work in an incompatible job.

Impact of Preparation and Training on Welfare

The training techniques used can impact interactions and the outcomes process. For example, a guide, hearing, or service dog is traditionally trained for a one dog *one* person model. This means that a key element, beginning in early training, is that the dog focuses on only one person, the handler. They are trained to avoid social engagement with community-dwelling humans and dogs, to not vocalize, and follow a lot of cues.

A dog being prepared for AAS is trained for a one dog, *many* people model. While the dog will likely have one guardian, it begins training for the social Olympics very early on. He is reinforced and rewarded for approaching and engaging people, for being inquisitive of places and things, and even to politely vocalize in excitement when they see a client approaching. Many clients may have never actually experienced anyone being excited to see them, until they experience AAS.

Preparation for AAS is so much more than obedience training. When clients participate in regular healthcare, education, and human services, the practitioner and client begin to co-regulate. This involves developing a trusting relationship, having structure in the environment, and coaching self-regulation skills (Rosanbalm and Murray, 2017). AAS is another tool that can facilitate the process. How we interact with our animals gives clients information about how we may interact with them. Imagine the client's perception if they observe regular animal interactions as controlling with aversive methods such as choke chains, prong or electrocution collars, or forced participation. Now envision a situation in which we model a trusting relationship, free of physical or emotional punishment, with rich reinforcement and reward-based interactions. We model advocacy skills that are based on the individual dog's preferences, and

clients become more confident in advocating for the animal and later, for themselves.

Animals do not share the same complex expressive and receptive communication abilities that humans use, yet they are quite skilled at reading body language. And while they use expressive body language and vocalizations to communicate, the range of human abilities to identify, interpret, and respond to these is broad. Just like humans, animal behavior happens in context and can be subtle. Animals process environmental stimuli such as auditory, olfactory, visual, gustatory, tactile, proprioceptive, vestibular, and interoceptive stimuli differently from humans. Handlers must understand how these impact the experience of the dog. Handlers should also ensure that their dogs get frequent breaks away from people to just enjoy their "dogness" and engage in activities that are enriching to them. For example, dogs sleep 12–15 hours a day and when they are working with us, they should still be able to take frequent naps or take days off from working.

Welfare-guided Team Evaluation

The skills and evaluation of human–dog teams in areas such as therapy and education may look different from that of a team who chooses volunteer visiting. The roles and expectations for each dog vary according to each handler's discipline, range of knowledge and skills, and stylistic approach to their work. There are as many ways to develop a session plan as there are professionals. Different jobs and different skills call for a difference in selection, preparation, and evaluation.

We know that dog behavior and communication occur in context, that is in real time and in direct response to the people, environmental stimuli, and the activities before it. Evaluation should include the handler's ability to predict, recognize, and respond to an animal's communication in the moment. This includes acknowledging that how dogs perceive the behavior of our clients may be different from how our clients intended it. People tend to put unnecessary social pressure on dogs which can cause discomfort. Part of the handler's job is advocating and educating clients about the dog's likes and dislikes, prior to interactions. Just because we can train a dog to do something does not mean that we should ask them to do it. For example, most dogs do not enjoy being patted on the head, being crowded, or being groomed by a clumsy stranger. Is this necessary or can we do better by educating our clients about preferences?

The handler should have skills to set up the dog and client for successful interactions. In addition to preparation and evaluation, it means that our dogs' behaviors and signals should be assessed before, during, and after every session, every time they join us in session. If they are not feeling well, or are uncomfortable with a particular client, we have to pay attention and ameliorate that stressful situation. In addition, considering a dog's aging process, every 52 days is approximately a year to a dog. Just as our preferences and interests change over time, so do those of our dogs, just at a much faster rate. We recommend that objective evaluations occur, by a skilled veterinarian or dog trainer with behavior experience, in context—including the population, environment, and representation of activity skill sets—at least yearly. Good welfare also includes regular health checks by a qualified veterinarian.

Welfare does not stop with preparation of the handler and dog. We must ensure that each potential client is screened for participation in AAS. Some considerations include assessing developmental levels. Young children and others with cognitive disabilities may not have the skills to follow directions, lack impulse control, or may mouth/eat things off the floor—including toys that dogs have mouthed. These behaviors increase zoonotic risk factors and make for an unsafe situation for the dog.

Understanding the client's history and perception of animals is critical to avoid further trauma to the client or the dog. People with physical disabilities may not be able to control the pressure or location of a friendly stroke of a dog's fur. They may lose balance bending over to greet a dog, or unintentionally move their wheelchair when the dog's tail is under the wheel. Handlers should be able to predict and help prevent anything that could possibly go wrong.

Conclusion and Recommendations

AASs are a worthwhile pursuit; however, specialty training for both handler and dog is required. This may include formal university certificate programs or continuing education programs or coursework. Any of these options should include a hands-on component. Membership of professional

organizations can also be used to provide practitioners with standards, competencies, and ongoing continuing education.

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