

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Engagement During Animal-Assisted Therapy for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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DEGREE: Doctor of Philosophy

COLLEGE: Health

Date: July 2018

Pages: 148

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has acquired a strong gathering of anecdotal evidence, but is presently limited in empirical validation as an effective intervention for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Further, the heterogeneity of symptom patterns inherently present in the ASD diagnosis arguably makes group-level analyses challenging in deciphering true specificity of change from interventions. Therefore, this study sought to implement a multiple subject case study design to provide greater specificity in how AAT potentially impacts levels of engagement for children with ASD during social skills lessons. This study's research questions concerned whether observed levels of engagement would increase as compared to off-task behaviors, whether parents would observe functional social skill improvements, and whether parents would observe symptomatic improvements for children with ASD over the course of the social skills lessons within the summer camp programming. While the results of this study did not specifically confirm any of the predicted trends, it appears AAT may potentially increase passive engagement in children with ASD. Further, there may be a developmental difference in AAT and social skill intervention that requires further empirical validation. This proposed mechanism of passive engagement during social skills lessons can inform future study on how

children with ASD may benefit from the presence of therapy dogs to increase overall skill attainment.