

BACKGROUND

Pet therapy or animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a specialized intervention where the physiotherapist uses trained animals to improve physical and psychological functions due to an active interaction between patient and animal. Among the various forms of AAT, hippotherapy is the most extensively investigated approach, particularly in children with cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and idiopathic scoliosis [1][2]. Studies have shown that hippotherapy enhances gross motor functions such as good trunk control, sitting position, general coordination and balance, strength and mobility[1].

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this literature review is to evaluate and highlight the potential benefits of animal assisted therapy in enhancing the rehabilitation experience of children.

METHODS

Authors searched for English articles published from 2015 up to 2025 on the electronic databases PubMed, Cochrane Library and Scopus using the following keywords, combined to maximize the sensitivity of the search strategy: ("pet therapy" OR "animal assisted therapy" OR "animal-assisted intervention*" OR "equine-assisted therapy" OR hippotherapy OR "therapy dog*" OR "animal-assisted activity*") AND (pediatric OR child* OR infant* OR adolescen* OR "pediatric rehabilitation"). Articles were screened by title and abstract, using the following inclusion criteria: (1) randomized controlled trials; (2) written in English language; (3) published on indexed journals; and (4) dealing with animal-assisted therapy interventions in pediatric rehabilitation. Exclusion criteria were (1) non-randomized trials; (2) reviews; (3) papers written in other languages than English; and (4) data not dealing with animal-assisted therapy and pediatric physiotherapy. A PRISMA flowchart of the selection and screening method was created, and a total of 26 studies were included in this scoping review.

RESULTS

All the selected articles demonstrated that animal-assisted therapy, particularly hippotherapy, positively influences motor function, postural control, spasticity, and neuromuscular outcomes in pediatric populations with neurological, neurodevelopmental, and postural conditions (e.g., cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, and idiopathic scoliosis), supporting their integration into pediatric physiotherapy practice. The Cochrane Risk of Bias for RCT tool was used for the randomized controlled trials included in the review.

CONCLUSION

Pet therapy, particularly hippotherapy, has proven to be an effective intervention in pediatric physical therapy for children with cerebral palsy and other disorders. Future research should aim to integrate these approaches into personalized physical therapy programs. It is essential to implement targeted, multidisciplinary interventions that actively involve families in order to effectively meet each child's individual needs.

REFERENCES

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