

Dog-Assisted Therapy as a Supportive Approach for Enhancing Communication and Engagement in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Background:

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often have significant difficulties with communication and social interaction, which can hinder their participation in therapy and their inclusion in educational and rehabilitation settings. Traditional speech and rehabilitation approaches are often insufficient for children who avoid interaction due to anxiety, sensory sensitivities, or low motivation. Animal-assisted interventions, particularly canistherapy (dog-assisted therapy), have gained attention as a motivating, holistic approach that may facilitate engagement, emotional regulation, and communication. However, empirical evidence remains limited, especially regarding its relevance to physiotherapy and interdisciplinary rehabilitation practices.

Objectives

This study aimed to explore changes in speech and communication skills in children with ASD during canistherapy. Additionally, it sought to identify clinically relevant indicators that could assist physiotherapists and other rehabilitation specialists in working with children who are difficult to engage through conventional therapeutic approaches.

Methods

A mixed-methods exploratory case study design was employed. Participants included four preschool-aged children diagnosed with ASD (aged 2.7–6.6 years), their parents ($n = 13$), practicing canistherapists ($n = 15$), and expert canistherapist–speech therapists ($n = 4$). Data were collected through parental questionnaires, expert interviews, and structured observations of therapy sessions at multiple time points. The FOCUS (Focus on the Outcomes of Communication Under Six) outcome measure was also used. Communication episodes (verbal and nonverbal) with the therapist and therapy dog were systematically recorded and analyzed over a four-month period.

Results

Across cases, canistherapy was associated with increased child engagement, reduced anxiety, and improvements in communication-related behaviors. Key observed changes included increased eye contact (particularly with the therapy dog and, over time, with human interaction), growth in self-initiated communication, more frequent response behaviors, increased vocalization (sounds, syllables, and functional words), and a reduction in repetitive motor behaviors. Parents and therapists reported improved cooperation, motivation, and emotional regulation. However, outcomes varied between children, suggesting that canine therapy is not universally effective, though it may be particularly valuable for children with pronounced communication avoidance.

Conclusion

Dog-assisted therapy appears to be a meaningful adjunct intervention for children with ASD who experience barriers to participating in conventional therapy. For pediatric physiotherapists, the findings underscore the potential of animal-assisted therapy to reduce stress, promote emotional regulation, and boost therapeutic engagement.

References

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