

THE EFFECT OF ANIMAL-ASSISTED ACTIVITIES (AAA) INVOLVING A DOG ON PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN THE LIGHT OF THEIR PARENTS' OPINIONS

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Abstract. The aim of this study was to evaluate the effect of activities with dogs (AAA) on pre-school children in the light of their parents' opinions. The study was performed based on a questionnaire addressed to the parents of a group of 18 children participating in pre-school activities at the Youth Centre in Szczecin. Based on the questionnaire completed by the parents of children participating in the activities involving a dog, it is possible to conclude that this type of meetings have a definitely positive effect on many aspects of the functioning of children. All the surveyed parents think that these activities positively affect the well-being of their children and the formation of positive emotions. Ninety five percent of the respondents think that a dog motivates a child to perform various tasks and exercises, while among positive changes being observed after these activities with a dog the parents most often name a disposition to greater physical activity, better contact with peers, increased sense of safety and self-confidence, improved concentration of attention and emotional calmness of children. These activities are very popular among children and enjoy great satisfaction among their parents. The responds referring to the type of activities and the characteristics of a therapy dog are evidence of the fact that the parents are well informed on the issues of canine-assisted therapy, which may signal a growing awareness among our society. These observations show that the activities involving animals (AAA-type ones) are not only useful in the rehabilitation of people with disabilities but also bring a number of benefits in the work with children with normal intellectual and physical development, contributing the same to better development of all areas of the child's functioning.

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Key words: animal-assisted activity, animal-assisted therapy, children, dogs, dog-assisted activity

INTRODUCTION

In Poland, a growing interest in activities with animal participation may be observed with every year. The first animal-assisted activities date back to the 1980s when the first therapy camps involving horses were organised. Canine-assisted therapy in Poland has begun to develop in the 1990s. It is, apart from hippotherapy, the fastest growing branch of animal-assisted therapy. In Poland, there are 2 terms referring to therapeutic activities with dogs: *dogoterapia* (dog-assisted therapy) and *kynoterapia* (kynotherapy). Whatever the word would be used to name these activities, their sense and objective is the same. In the simplest terms, it is a multi-profile contact therapy involving properly prepared dogs. Initially in Poland, the activities with dogs had a spontaneous character and were conducted by dog breeders and dog lovers associated in several organisations. The efforts of people being interested in the fact that the level of canine-assisted activities would be the highest led to the approval of a profession of dog therapist / kynotherapist in 2007. The most frequently organised activities involving animals fall within the framework of activities being determined by Delta Society (Pet Partners at present) in 1996 as AAA (Animal-Assisted Activities), i.e. activities with animals, and AAT (Animal-Assisted Therapy), i.e. therapy with animals. The aim of this paper was to evaluate the effect of activities with dogs (AAA) on pre-school children in the light of their parents' opinions.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was performed based on a questionnaire addressed to the parents of a group of 18 children with normal physical and intellectual development, participating in pre-school activities at the Youth Centre in Szczecin. The activities with dogs were carried out during the school year – from September to June, once a month, and lasting for half of hour. These activities were conducted under the supervision of a qualified dog therapist with two Labrador Retriever dogs (6 y.o., spayed females). The parents of children participating in these activities could stay in a room and observe the course of classes. After the end of the school year, the parents were asked to complete the questionnaire presented below:

1. Sex of the child: a) boy, b) girl.
2. Age of the child:

3. What form of canine-assisted therapy does your child make use of? a) therapy involving a dog, b) activities involving a dog, c) education involving a dog.
4. How often did / does your child participate in canine assisted therapy?: a) once-twice a week, b) once a month, c) several times a year.
5. What type of activities did / do they represent?: a) group, b) individual.
6. Where did / does your child participate in canine-assisted therapy?: a) only in a pre-school, b) privately – outside educational institution.
7. Do you think that canine-assisted therapy activities have a positive effect on your child's well-being?: a) definitely yes, b) rather yes, c) rather no, d) definitely now.
8. Do you think that your child is able sometimes to open up more to a dog than to a human?: a) yes, b) no, c) i do not know.
9. Do you think that your child can be more motivated to perform various tasks and exercises when assisted by a dog?: a) yes, b) no, c) i do not know.
10. Do you think the contact with a dog can affect the formation of positive emotions of your child?: a) definitely yes, b) rather yes, c) rather no, d) definitely now.
11. How did your child react to his / her first canine-assisted therapy activities?: a) he / she was involved in them for the whole time, b) he / she was interested but only at the beginning, c) he / she was indifferent, d) he / she was scared and cried, e) he / she showed a negative attitude.
12. How does your child react to upcoming activities with a dog?: a) he / she is pleased, looks forward to them, b) he / she is indifferent, distance himself / herself from them, c) he / she is scared, reluctantly participates.
13. What positive changes have you observed in your child after activities with a dog?: a) better contact with peers, b) increased motivation to performing exercises and tasks, c) improved well-being, d) improved concentration, e) emotional calmness, f) improved motor skills, g) disposition to greater physical activity, h) enlarged vocabulary, i) increased self-reliance, j) increased sense of safety, k) increased self-confidence, l) reduced aggressive behaviour, m) enlarged empathy.
14. Are you satisfied with your child's participation in these activities u?: a) definitely yes, b) rather yes, c) rather no, d) definitely now.
15. In your opinion, which of the temperament attributes presented below has been showed by a therapy dog?: a) good-natured, b) obedient, c) stress-resistant, d) patient, loving to be fondled, e) happy but ever-tempered, f) none of the above.
16. Do you know what breed do the dogs working with your child represent?: a) yes (what), b) no.
17. In your view, when observing the relationships of your child with a dog, is the saying "a dog is a man's best friend" confirmed in reality?: a) definitely yes, b) rather yes, c) rather no, d) definitely now.

Questions 1 and 2 are of the information nature, whereas questions 3–17 are closed-ended ones with single-choice and multiple-choice answers. In questions 13 and 15, the parents could give more than 1 answer.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

So far, many papers have described the benefits of human contact with animals, with a dog occupying a special place in many of them as an animal accompanying the man for the longest time [Wells 2007, 2009, Ustjan 2008, Dimitrijević 2009, Endenburg and van Lith 2011, Grandgeorge and Hausberger 2011]. Many authors have also drawn attention to the knowledge of the rules of safe behaviour in the contact with dogs by children [Meints and Keuster 2009, Reisner et al. 2011, Schwebel et al. 2012]. The first activities with a dog are always intended to understand a dog and learn the rules of safe behaviour near a dog, approaching and contacting it, as well as a behaviour when a dog attacks. Each activity involving a dog begins with greeting dogs and a therapist by children. At about this time, the work on how to assist the child's functioning in different areas is started. For example, greeting (and saying good-bye) assists the development of social competencies, while due to exercises consisting in stroking a dog upon greeting with different parts of child's body children improve their orientation in the scheme of own body. In the main part of these activities, children perform different exercises developing, among others, fine and gross motor skills, orientation in space, balance, better learn the specific character of dog behaviour, learn how to co-operate in a group, learn how to be responsible and how to care for an animal, and learn empathy. Each activity ends with saying good-bye to an animal and a therapist. The above actions represent only a small part of the benefits which can be achieved during the work with a dog, depending on the type of activities being conducted (AAA or AAT) and the deficits (or they lack) in children participating in these activities.

In the activities being observed during this study, there were eighteen children participating, with normal intellectual and physical development, 8 girls and 10 boys (Fig. 1), aged 3 (1 child), 4 (15 children) and 5 years (2 children). Figures 2 and 3 present the percentage distribution of the variants of answers given in the questionnaire being completed by their parents. When answering question 3, the parents mostly accurately determined the form of activities in which their children participated, choosing variant "b", i.e. activities involving a dog (60.5% of answers). More than 83% children participated in activities on a regular basis once a month (question 4). All the parents accurately determined the type of activities as group ones (question 5). In question 6, one hundred percent of the parents stated that their children participate in the activities in the pre-school; one child of the

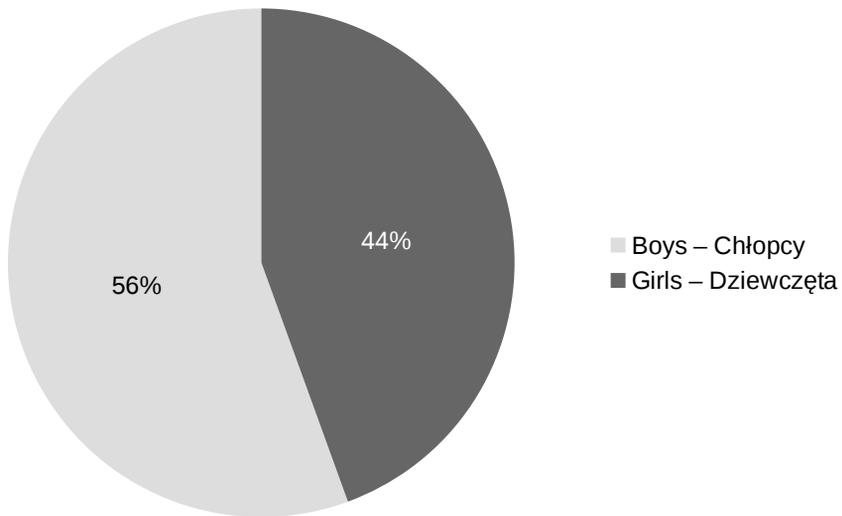


Fig. 1. Percentage distribution of children under observation by gender

Rys. 1. Procentowy rozkład płci wśród dzieci objętych obserwacjami

examined group also participated in canine-assisted therapy but on a private basis. In answer to question 7: “Do you think that canine-assisted therapy activities have a positive effect on your child’s well-being?”, 66% of the parents responded “definitely yes”, while 33% of them answered “rather yes”. None of the parents responded negatively. More than 55% of the parents also thinks that their child sometimes is open up more to a dog than to a human and 45% of the respondents answered that they do not know, whereas none of them did not choose “no” (question 8). In question 9, almost ninety percent of the surveyed parents stated that a dog has a motivating effect on the behaviour of their child. All the parents were of the opinion that a contact with a dog has a beneficial effect on the formation of positive emotions in their child (almost 80% of the parents answered “definitely yes”), while 90% of them stated that their child is pleased with upcoming activities and looks forward to them (questions 10 and 12). Similar results have been obtained by other authors, e.g. Nawrocka-Rohnka [2010], when analysing the participation of 23 children with developmental disorders in the therapy involving a dog. The parents of seventeen children in the present study observed that their children come to these activities very willingly but only one child reluctantly participated in them. Pluta [2011], when carrying out a questionnaire among the parents of children participating in hippotherapy, has also found that children willingly come to these activities.

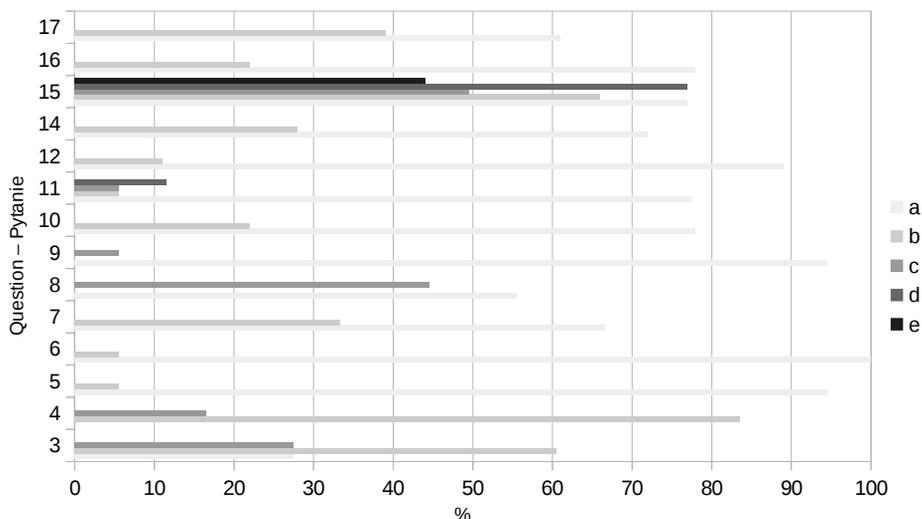


Fig. 2. Percentage distribution of the variants of answers (questions 3–12 and 14–17) given in the questionnaire being conducted among the parents of children participating in animal-assisted activities with a dog; a, ..., e – for description see Material and methods

Rys. 2. Procentowy rozkład wariantów odpowiedzi na pytania 3–12 i 14–17, udzielonych w ankiecie przeprowadzonej wśród rodziców dzieci uczestniczących w zajęciach z udziałem psa; a, ..., e – opisy: patrz rozdział Materiał i metody

In question 11: “How did your child react to his / her first canine-assisted therapy activities”, 77.5% of the respondents chose answer “a”, i.e. “he / she was involved in them for the whole time”, whereas 11.5% of children was scared and cried. However, no child showed a definite negative attitude (answer “e”). As noted by Nawrocka-Rohnka [2010] in her observations, the reduction of anxiety during therapeutic activities involving a dog occurred in all children in whom this problem was present.

Question 13 (Fig. 3) referred to a beneficial effect of the activities involving a dog. Among beneficial effects of these activities, the parents most often indicated an improved well-being (44%), increased motivation to performing exercises and tasks and disposition to greater physical activity (38% each), better contact with peers (33%), increased sense of safety (27%), improved concentration, increased self-confidence and enlarged empathy (22% each). In the observations of Nawrocka-Rohnka [2010], the parents of children participating in a therapy involving a dog observed an improvement in the expression of emotions by children and greater openness to new situations. On the other hand, in the study by Pluta [2011] analysing the opinions of parents referring to the effect of hippotherapy

on the physical and mental state of their children, all the respondents confirmed a positive effect of these activities on the psychological and physical well-being of children.

Seventy two percent of the respondents was definitely satisfied with the participation of their children in the activities involving a dog (question 14, Fig. 2), while 28% answered “rather yes”. None of the parents responded negatively. The satisfaction with the participation of their children in therapeutic activities involving a dog was also expressed by 100% of the parents being surveyed in the study by Nawrocka-Rohnka [2010]; all of them expressed the willingness to continue these activities and would recommend them to other parents.

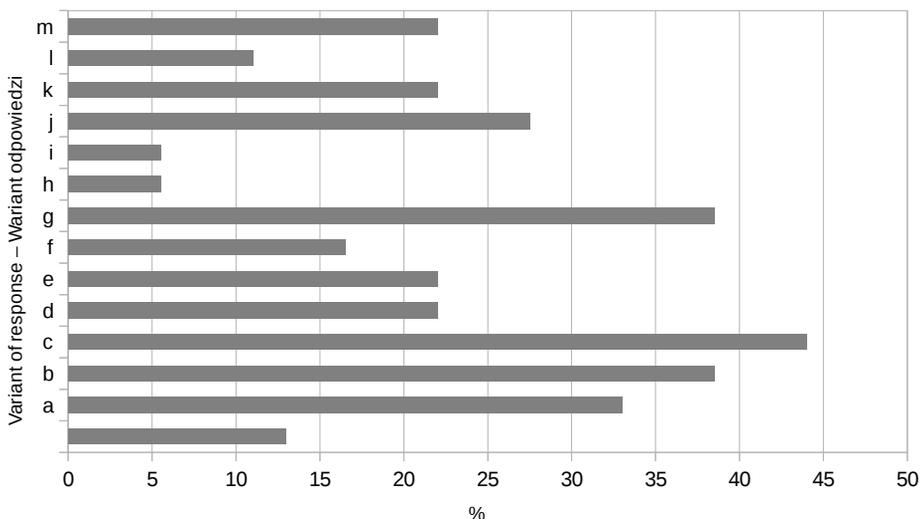


Fig. 3. Percentage distribution of the variants of answers for question 13; a,...,m – for description see Material and methods

Rys. 3. Procentowy rozkład wariantów odpowiedzi na pytanie 13; a,...,m – opisy: patrz rozdział Materiał i metody

In question 15, the parents were asked to indicate attributes which a therapy dog should show. Seventy seven percent of them indicated answer “a”, i.e. “be good-natured”, and answer “d”, i.e. “be patient, loving to be fondled”. Sixty six percent of the parents named dog’s obedience, almost 50% indicated stress resistance, while 44% defined a therapy dog as “happy but even-tempered”. Almost 80% of the parents accurately determined the breed of dogs participating the these activities (question 16.). Question 17 referred to the relationships between a child and a dog being observed. One hundred percent of the surveyed parents stated

that the saying “a dog is a man’s best friend” is confirmed in reality (60% percent responded “definitely yes”, while 40% answered “rather yes”).

CONCLUSION

Based on the questionnaire completed by the parents of children participating in the activities involving a dog, it is possible to conclude that this type of meetings have a definitely positive effect on many aspects of the functioning of children. All the surveyed parents think that these activities positively affect the well-being of their children and the formation of positive emotions. Ninety five percent of the respondents think that a dog motivates a child to perform various tasks and exercises, while among positive changes being observed after these activities with a dog the parents most often name a disposition to greater physical activity, better contact with peers, increased sense of safety and self-confidence, improved concentration of attention and emotional calmness of children. These activities are very popular among children and enjoy great satisfaction among their parents. The responds referring to the type of activities and the characteristics of a therapy dog are evidence of the fact that the parents are well informed on the issues of canine-assisted therapy, which may signal a growing awareness among our society. These observations show that the activities involving animals (AAA-type ones) are not only useful in the rehabilitation of people with disabilities but also bring a number of benefits in the work with children with normal intellectual and physical development, contributing the same to better development of all areas of the child’s functioning.

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WPLYW ZAJĘĆ Z UDZIAŁEM PSA (AAA) NA DZIECI W WIEKU PRZEDSZKOLNYM W ŚWIETLE OPINII ICH RODZICÓW

Streszczenie. W pracy przedstawiono ocenę wpływu zajęć z udziałem psa (AAA) na dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym w świetle opinii ich rodziców. Badania przeprowadzono na podstawie ankiety skierowanej do rodziców 18-osobowej grupy dzieci w normie fizycznej i intelektualnej uczęszczających na zajęcia przedszkolne w Pałacu Młodzieży w Szczecinie. Na podstawie ankiet wypełnionych przez rodziców dzieci uczestniczących w zajęciach z udziałem psa można wnioskować, że tego typu spotkania mają zdecydowanie pozytywny wpływ na wiele aspektów funkcjonowania dzieci. Wszyscy ankietowani rodzice uważali, że zajęcia wpływają pozytywnie na samopoczucie dzieci i kształtowanie pozytywnych emocji. Dziewięćdziesiąt pięć procent respondentów uważało, że pies motywuje dziecko do wykonywania różnych zadań i ćwiczeń. Wśród pozytywnych zmian obserwowanych po zajęciach z psem rodzice wymieniali najczęściej chęć do większej aktywności fizycznej, lepszy kontakt z rówieśnikami, wzrost poczucia bezpieczeństwa i pewności siebie, poprawę koncentracji uwagi i spokój emocjonalny dziecka. Prowadzone zajęcia cieszą się dużym zainteresowaniem wśród dzieci i ich rodziców. Odpowiedzi dotyczące rodzaju zajęć i cech psa-terapeuty świadczą o tym, że rodzice dobrze orientują się w zagadnieniach z zakresu dogoterapii, co może dowodzić rosnącej świadomości wśród naszego społeczeństwa. Z przeprowadzonych obserwacji wynika, że zajęcia typu AAA są nie tylko przydatne w rehabilitacji osób niepełnosprawnych, ale przynoszą również szereg korzyści w pracy z dziećmi w normie intelektualnej i ruchowej, przyczyniając się do lepszego rozwoju wszystkich obszarów funkcjonowania dziecka.

Słowa kluczowe: zajęcia z udziałem zwierząt, terapia z udziałem zwierząt, dzieci, psy, zajęcia z udziałem psa

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