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Benefits of Pet Therapy for Children and Young Adults

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Abstract: With the development of psychology, the mental health of children is paid more attention than before. Reducing attachment to parents and anxiety are common mental issues in children. People need to focus on the mental health of the children. There have been several studies about the function of pets and how they positively or negatively support adults' mental condition. With the increasing number of pets owned, pets play an important role in several families. Pets play an essential role in affecting children's mental health. Pet therapy is an example of how pets impact the mental condition of children. This research focuses on how pets can work in pet therapy to help children reduce mental stress and how pets in their daily lives can help young adults and children perform better social development. The research reviews several previous study papers about pets' influence on children's mental and social development. The research finds that pet therapy can help children with physical health and disabled children reduce their mental stress from the environment and society. In their daily lives, children in families with pets benefit from socio-emotional development and get social support from pets.

Keywords: pet therapy, pet, children, socio-emotion, social support.

1. Introduction

As more people are willing to raise pets in the family, researchers have done several studies to determine the relationships between humans and pets. Pet attachment is the concept of studying and describing the pattern of how pets live with humans. Previous studies concluded that pets can provide social and psychological support to pet owners [1]. However, these studies mainly use adults as participants; they did not specifically describe how the pet benefits children. However, in common knowledge, children with pets will display higher reasonability and empathy. The studies need to explain the function of pets to children in more detail. To investigate the benefit of pets for children and young adults, this research will focus on the medical field, social support, and socio-emotional function of children and young adults. This paper can fill the fields related to children and animals' attachment. It can serve as strong evidence to support the families that having pets can benefit the further development of children in terms of mental health and social relationships.

2. Pet Therapy and History

Pet therapy can be applied to a wide range of ages to satisfy a variety of needs. The most common locations that include pet therapy are hospitals, long-term-care settings, hospice centers, and schools. The animals that are used in the therapy are not limited to dogs and cats; birds, guinea pigs, fish,

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rabbits, horses, and dolphins are also common animals in pet therapy. However, some of them need special appointments. Humans and animals can form essential bonds during the therapy, which can further benefit the impact of the therapies. During the therapy, pets can interact with patients with different patterns, including holding and talking to animals. Meanwhile, the pets in the therapy are trained by the facilities to ensure the security of patients and the effects of the therapy. In the process of pet therapy, the animals can be used to distract the attention of patients by walking or swimming with them. Sometimes, the animals are applied in the targeted therapy, or they are partial to the facility environment and allowed to move around to interact with the patients in the facilities [2].

3. Benefits of Pet Therapy and Young Adult

3.1. Pet Therapy Benefits for Children

The previous study focuses on how pet therapy can help children reduce mental issues such as anxiety [3]. Hospitalization of children may cause substantial mental stress to both children and families, and the stress may cause physical pain and fear to the hospital workers. The animal-assisted activities claim that the interaction of pets can help children feel comfortable and give them a feeling at home, which can help the recovery of children. The study found that there were several studies about the effects of pet therapy. However, there was little research related to how pet therapy impacts hospitalized children. The study compares pet therapy with traditional puzzle activity to figure out how pet therapy can reduce anxiety. This quasi-study took place in a hospital that provides several different kinds of treatment to children. Meanwhile, the pet therapy team is part of the programs to support the patients. The study uses a conscience sample of hospitalized children and adolescents. All the participants are English speakers, and they do not have cognitive impairments. The children and adolescents range from 6 to 17. 73% of participants require medical treatment, and 27% of them require urgent treatment. Eighty-two participants were equally separated into intervention or control groups. After researchers explained the procedures of the research and got the agreement of both parents and children, participants were asked to complete the State-Trait Anxiety Scale for Children (STAIC) S-Anxiety Scale to evaluate their anxiety levels. For the control group, researchers cooperated with children to finish a jigsaw puzzle about the underwater environment. At the same time, the researchers educated children about the skills to reduce anxiety based on the puzzle activity. After the activity and education, researchers asked participants to refill the STAIC S-Anxiety Scale, and their parents also needed to complete a questionnaire, which was created by researchers. For the pet therapy group, participants would interact with the therapy dogs and their team. Simultaneously, researchers will educate children on skills to reduce anxiety based on their interaction with therapy animals. Then, the STAIC S-Anxiety Scale will be applied to evaluate the anxiety level of children, and their parents need to finish other questionnaires made by researchers. The research data includes the anxiety score before and after the intervention. The study used a t-test to analyze and compare the control and intervention groups. Furthermore, to develop the difference in anxiety between groups pre and post-evaluation, the Mann-Whitney U test was applied. The analysis of data indicates that in the short term, pet therapy can more effectively reduce the condition of anxiety in contrast with puzzle activity, which also fits with the results of other studies. In addition, the studies point out that after surgery, the stress of children might be from the anxiety feeling of parents. Pet therapy can help reduce stress and distraction from current conditions. With increasing ages, children will more fully understand their physical state and the procedures of treatments, and their anxiety levels will rise. Fortunately, pet therapy can reduce the anxiety of both patients and families, which can further reduce the anxiety level of children.

The limitation of this study lies in its study methods. The study was constrained by a convenience sample and a lack of randomization due to the unique features of the hospitals. Additionally, the study

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did not collect the history of medicine use, which may include medicines that help reduce anxiety. However, this study is significant in that it fills a gap in clinical research, specifically studying the effect of pet therapy on both children and their families. It provides new strategies to help nurses and child life specialists reduce stress and anxiety, thereby enhancing the quality of care for hospitalized children and their families.

Meanwhile, pet therapy can be applied to a wide range of children, especially children under particular conditions. Disable children as a part of society; their mental health is worse than healthy children. For example, based on the data, intellectually disabled may suffer from substance difficulty in their daily lives, and their survival rate is much less than normal children. In addition, the cognitive deficits impact these children's social function, which can cause loneliness, mood, anxiety, and emotional problems. An unhealthy mental state will also cause a higher rate of cognitive disease [4]. The previous study mainly focused on the physical health of children, and the effects on disabled children were ignored. However, recently, researchers have paid attention to the children in social fringe to ensure disabled children's wellness and mental health; recent studies focus on the effect of pet therapy on disabled children's mental state. The study tries to prove that physically disabled children will show lower stress levels and social anxiety than children in control after taking the pet therapy [5]. The study took randomized controlled trials to measure the level of stress and social anxiety of physically disabled children. Each week, the intervention group had therapy lasting 40-50 minutes. For the control groups, the study didn't take any program to intervention participants. The participants were 44 physically disabled children, ages ranging from 8 to 11 years old. Meanwhile, this child only has physical disabilities, which means they don't have cognitive deficits. Before the research, the researchers reduce the factors that may impact the result of the experiment as much as possible. The study chose cats as their therapy pets since cats are more stable in this condition. When collecting the data, the researcher applied the Perceived Stress Scale to evaluate the stress level of participants, the Social Anxiety Scale for Children to measure the social anxiety level, and Blood Pressure Monitoring to observe any physiological changes that may relate to stress. The result of the study indicates that the intervention group displayed a significant reduction in stress levels after the pet therapy, and the control groups didn't show any changes in stress levels. For social anxiety levels, participants who accepted pet therapy showed a significant decrease in anxiety levels; the control groups didn't show any changes. The blood pressure after the pet therapy also indicates that participants are relaxed after the intervention. The results prove the hypothesis and demonstrate the function of pet therapy. There is a limitation in the research; the kinds of pets were single, which caused the result to not be applied to every kind of pet. However, it is true that this study further proves that pets can reduce the anxiety level of children in particular conditions. It indicates that in regular daily lives, the pet can still perform its function in the family to help children reduce the stress from the new environment and help them evolve in society.

3.2. Social Support

Besides the pet therapy applied in the hospital, pets can still influence children's mental health in everyday life. The pet attachment is an important bond that connects human and companion animals. Several studies have proven that pets can promote mental and physical health, and they can link people to other potential friends, which is considered a social support function [6]. However, this study focuses on the mental state of adults. The other previous survey focuses on the children's attachment to their pets. Meanwhile, the study explains the result on a psychological basis [7]. Ethology first proposes attachment theory in animal experiments. Then, researchers applied this theory to children, and from the researcher, different types of attachment were concluded. Recently, researchers have focused more on the attachment between humans and companion animals. By studying pet attachment, people find that children can form strong bonds with their animals. Previous

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studies have tried to find out if the ownership of a pet will affect social support and internalizing symptoms. The 1331 participants of the study were from first-year to fourth-year college students. The participants were invited into the research group in their first year, and their data was followed for three years. During the data collection, S4S was applied in the study to evaluate the mental state of the participants. Meanwhile, in the analysis of the different parts of the items, the Big Five Inventory was applied to assess the personality. The survey was about pet ownership, social support, and internalizing symptoms. The data indicate that 72% of the participants grew up with pets, and dogs are the most common animals. The conclusion comparing the students who grew up with pets with students who didn't have pets: students who grew up with pets show higher social support and constantly increasing internalizing symptoms. Comparing between genders, women show higher levels of internalizing symptoms than males. The limitation of the study is that the data was collected from self-reports. The survey method causes researchers not detailly to record the change of the participants. Meanwhile, the background of students may also impact the result. However, it is true that this study focuses on the young adults of the college and describes the effect of pets on social support.

3.3. Social Development

Socio-emotional development is essential for children in early childhood. The socio-emotional development includes forming social relationships, regulating emotions, and interacting with others. Since this development is majorly in early childhood, especially the ability of emotion regulation, the experience in early childhood is crucial for children [8]. The previous study found the benefits that dogs bring to children. Since the study was conducted in Spain, and dogs are popular pets in Spanish families, the study mainly focuses on the dog to study the benefits of social development [9]. The participants of the study were 120 children from a private school in the province of Tarragona. Their ages range from 37 to 68 months old. These participants were separated into two groups: one group lived with a pet, and the other was participants who didn't live with a pet. The study used the Spanish version of the Battelle Developmental Inventory to assess children's socioemotional development. The BDI includes six items to collect data on the personal-social domain specifically. Then, the researchers transformed the score into a Developmental Quotient and got the average score. The study chose BDI to measure the developmental skills of children since this tool can cover the ages of birth to eight years. In the analysis, the researcher includes six subdomains: adult interaction, expression of feelings, self-image, peer interaction, cooperation, and social role. Adult interaction mainly measures the quality and frequency of interactions between children and adults. The expression of feelings helps researchers evaluate whether children can display their emotions in the appropriate context. Self-images determine the children's ability to recognize themselves. Peer interaction majorly determines the interaction between children of the same age. Cooperation is the item that determines children's ability to overcome the challenges of the environment. The last item, social role, is used to check children's understanding of social roles and behaviors. After analyzing the data, researchers found that contact with dogs significantly affects children's socialization. Meanwhile, there are visible differences between boys and girls. The study results indicate a considerable difference between children living with or without dogs. The performance of children who live with dogs shows a higher average score than other children. The study indicates that dogs can encourage children to develop compassion, friendship, respect, and care for other living beings, similar to other studies' results that show that child-pet attachment is important for children's early development [10].

The study's limitations include not determining the influence of family background on the results. However, the study provides a detailed analysis of the differences between children who live with or without dogs. It underscores the benefits of pets, particularly dogs, in children's early development and their role in fostering a positive psychological state. Social emotion is a crucial element in

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children's development, and this study suggests that pets, particularly dogs, can enhance children's abilities in this area. It also highlights the role of pets as members of the family and their contribution to children's mental well-being.

4. Conclusion

Pet therapy has been used in the clinic for a long time; it proves the unique function of pets in people's mental health. Most studies focus on adult patients. However, this study mainly focuses on the mental state of adults. The paper includes previous studies to prove that pet therapy can help children release stress from their condition. To apply this result to a more extensive range of populations, the other study concluded to describe the pet therapy effect on disabled children. It provides that the pet can also help children release social stress, which supplies the function of the pet. In addition, the result can be applied to daily life. This research also includes two studies to discuss the effect of pets on social function. Two studies all focus on the social function of pets that can promote children's mental development. This study concludes that pets can positively affect children and help them release stress to reveal their mental health. Pets can help children perform better than others in terms of their development. There is exist limitation of this research that in social support and socio-emotion research, the study did not eliminate the family background of participants. There is a potential possibility that family background can influence the result. Meanwhile, most research use self-report and questionnaires to finish the research, the result may be impacted by participants' subjective ideas. Future research can use observation of physical conditions to get more detailed data.

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