

Tips and Tools for Speech Therapy - AAT Activities



Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) is an enjoyable, helpful way to participate in speech therapy. Activities may involve the direct help of a therapy dog or be indirect, using thematically based materials about pets or animals. Therapy dogs can be especially helpful in transfers from the therapy environment to other speaking environments and in socialization activities.

Here are a few useful tips and tools:

The Rationale

Dogs can be powerful communication facilitators, a fact that is borne out by research. For example, it has been found that people who walk with a dog experience more social contact and longer conversations than when walking alone. Dogs offer unconditional acceptance and love, no matter if a person has a limited vocabulary, slurred speech or no speech at all.

Consent

Before you begin, be sure to ask the patient's permission to do speech therapy with a therapy dog. Ensure the person has no phobias, fears or allergies to dogs. Children will need parental permission. The College of Audiologists and Speech-Language Pathologists of Ontario requires consent for all speech language assessment and therapy. This includes AAT sessions.

Measureable Goals

Incorporate the same treatment goals into AAT as in traditional therapy but with a "canine twist." Nearly any therapy task can be restructured to incorporate a therapy dog team. Also, remember to include the volunteer handler in your activities. Measure progress across sessions as usual.

Treatment Materials

Create materials to meet your patient's needs. For example, articulation tasks might involve saying dog names or using speech targets to ask questions about the dog. Language activities might involve sentence completion tasks with a dog theme, generating lists of words about dogs or practising a short role play such as calling a vet or a pet store.

Reading and listening activities might involve pointing to parts of the dog's anatomy, answering yes/no questions about the dog or listening to a short paragraph about dogs. Cognitive communication therapy can include orientation, problem solving, attention or executive function activities focused on the animal. Imagination and creativity make AAT interesting for the right patient and the therapist alike.

A Typical Session

Sessions will depend on the tolerance of your patient as well as the therapy dog. It's probably best to plan some activities that will involve the dog directly and others that will give the animal a good break. If possible, involve the dog's handler in indirect activities. Ideally, you should have a quiet environment and a skid-free surface for the animal.

Transfers

The joy of working with a therapy dog is that staff, patients and passers-by often want to stop and say "hello." This is an ideal time to practice speech strategies whether the patient is adapting to an augmentative communication device or board, just starting to speak again, or shy and lacking confidence in communicating.

Reinforcement

Meeting a goal successfully can be reinforced by pausing a few minutes to pat the dog, having some fun by throwing a ball, or giving the animal a small treat. AAT is interactive, so patient success guarantees the therapy dog will enjoy the session as well. Ask the dog's handler to suggest activities and training commands that the dog enjoys and incorporate these into your sessions.

Discharge

Progress in AAT can be incorporated into your regular discharge report. Ask the patient for feedback about the sessions. Allow the patient to say "good-bye" to the dog and be sure to thank any volunteer therapy dog team for its contribution.

Resources and Further Information

Fine, Aubrey. Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy- Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice, Third Edition, Academic Press, 2010.

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OTD Toolbox Infosheet #10

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Good dogs doing great work!

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