Animal-Assisted Counseling for Young Children: Evidence Base, Best Practices, and Future Prospects

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Abstract
Increasing numbers of young children are experiencing mild to moderate mental health issues that require support in addition to that typically provided by family members and teachers. The services of professional counselors can be particularly useful when children need help adjusting to and coping with various stressors and situations. Many school counselors and other mental health professionals have found that carefully planned interactions between young children and animals (e.g., guinea pigs, rabbits, dogs, horses) represent an effective alternative/complementary therapeutic modality. Animals may provide an accepting, nonjudgmental presence that focuses young children's attention, motivates them to learn, and encourages participation in planned intervention activities. This article begins by describing the general purposes for counseling with young children and the role that early childhood educators can play in increasing families' awareness of and access to these services in their communities. Next, it defines animal-assisted counseling and reviews the relevant research to build a rationale for including carefully selected animals in mental health support services for children. The third section discusses caveats about involving animals in individual and small group counseling sessions, in classrooms, and in other facilities/programs that work with young children. The article then summarizes best practices in animal-assisted counseling and how they are influenced by variables within the child, animal welfare considerations, different contexts, availability of resources, and interagency collaborations. The conclusion is a statement on the future of animal-assisted counseling for young children and how it supports the goals of humane education.

Keywords Human–animal interaction (HAI) · Children's mental health · Children's wellbeing · Counseling children · Animal-assisted counseling · Alternative therapies · Complementary therapies · Animal-assisted intervention professionals · Humane education

Introduction
We begin this discussion of animal-assisted counseling based on situations we have encountered in which young children benefitted from professional counseling. Each vignette starts with an explanation of the mental health issue the child was confronting and concludes with an illustration of how an animal supported the success of the intervention.

Vignette 1: Graciella
Two generations ago, Graciella’s family moved to the United States from the Philippines. The seven-year-old’s father is employed as kitchen staff on a luxury cruise ship line and is far away from home most of the year. Graciella’s extended family places a high value on academic achievement and her mother, maternal grandmother, and aunts support her education. The first grader is an exceptionally good speller, but today she has made one mistake. When the paper is returned, Graciella begins to cry, wail, and collapses onto the floor. Her teacher attempts to comfort her without success, so Graciella’s Mom is contacted and takes her daughter home for the rest of the day. In talks with the family, the teacher learns that Graciella considers just one incorrectly spelled word to be
a shameful event. Her teacher and mother arrange a meeting with the school counselor, but the first grader seems to think this indicates she is in trouble at school. Graciella’s reluctance to leave the classroom for the appointment dissipates when the counselor arrives with her work partner—a beautiful, friendly, highly trained black Labrador retriever who is a familiar sight at the school. Her classmates want to interact with the dog, and each child is allowed to pet the dog one at a time, but Graciella is the only one who gets to spend the next 30 min with him. The counselor fully appreciates the importance of understanding the cultural context of Graciella’s situation. During the culturally responsive counseling sessions that follow, the first grader gradually learns to cope with perfectionism and accept that mistakes are an unavoidable part of the learning process.

Vignette 2: Brandon

In a small rural community, a late morning storm develops into a possible tornado and the electrical service is interrupted. The loud warning siren goes off and the teacher, aide, and children from a church-affiliated preschool take shelter in the basement of the old stone building. The adults try to distract the children with songs and fingerplays, but after Brandon says, “I’m scared” and begins to cry, several other children join in with comments such as, “This is spooky” and “I want the lights on.” Soon afterwards, the weather service announces that the threat is over. Although a tornado did touch down in a nearby rural area and damaged trees and destroyed a barn, no people or animals were harmed. Brandon’s mother calls the teacher because he is saying he does not want to go to school. Some of the other parents send messages that their children were shaken by the weather event. That afternoon, the teacher contacts all the families. She has acted quickly to invite into the school a professional counselor who volunteers frequently in the community. The counselor will be present at school the next morning and greet the children as they arrive. The counselor is a member of the church congregation and has visited before with her therapy dog that is insured and certified through Alliance of Therapy Dogs. The counselor will be observant and recognize the signs that a child is in psychological distress and work with children on mental health conditions that impact their lives, including such things as the effects of divorce, grief and loss, witnessing a traumatic event, mental health conditions/psychological distress, neurodevelopmental issues, bullying, neglect/abuse, relocation issues, and family substance abuse (Kress et al. 2019; Langham, 2019; Van Velsor, 2018). Early childhood educators must be observant and recognize the signs that a child is in psychological distress. Table 1 identifies some behaviors that are associated with mental health issues in the very young. Such patterns of behavior often indicate that the child might need the additional support from a licensed mental health professional (Ener & Ray, 2018).

It is important for teachers to reach out for assistance from school counselors and mental health professionals when a child’s behavior warrants additional support.

Rationale for Animal-Assisted Therapy

The human-nonhuman animal bond has a surprisingly long and complex history (Holin, 2021; Serpell, 2019). In terms of physical and mental health practice, the recommendation
that animals be part of the therapeutic alliance is far from new. In the 1700s, the Society of Friends incorporated the care of various farm animals as part of their treatment for mentally ill institutionalized patients. In the late 1800s, Florence Nightingale, the founder of the nursing profession, recommended that patients with chronic and critical illness could be comforted by interacting with small animals. In the 1930s, Sigmund Freud observed in his notes that patients were more comfortable and participated more during sessions when his favorite Chow-Chow, Jo-Fi, was there. In 1960, Dr. Boris Levinson presented a paper at the American Psychological Association annual conference describing how he involved his dog, Jingles, in sessions with patients. Although he was ridiculed for “going to the dogs,” his book *Pet-Oriented Child Psychotherapy* (Levinson, 1997) started the animal-assisted therapy movement. More recently, important books have provided helpful guidance to counselors (Tedeschi & Jenkins, 2019), and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Schuck et al., 2018). AAT and AAT-C can also be applied using theoretical approaches such as psycho-dynamic, gestalt, and cognitive behavioral therapy (Bachi & Parish-Plass, 2017). For ease of reference, we use the terminology of animal-assisted counseling throughout this article. These interventions can be delivered using a variety of treatment methods that include both individual and group counseling.

Table 2 summarizes research that documents positive effects associated with human–animal interaction, gives an

| Table 1: Indicators of psychological distress in young children |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Absence of playfulness and an unusually subdued, somber, and serious demeanor in a young child |
| Physical complaints (e.g., headache, stomachache) despite a healthy report from medical professionals, frequent requests to exit the classroom, or school refusal |
| Persisting at a behavior that that is uncharacteristic of agemates (e.g., thumb sucking in a 4-year-old) |
| Unprovoked aggression, defined as intentionally injuring another through words or actions |
| Regression to earlier forms of behavior (e.g., a child who used the toilet begins wetting/soiling undergarments) |
| Difficulty adjusting to social situations and/or avoidance of new situations |
| Voluntary social isolation, even when peers invite the child to join in |
| Recurrent nightmares, night terrors, and/or sleep disturbances |
| Sudden academic decline and difficulties in maintaining focus |
| Persistent worry/anxiety and hypervigilance in monitoring the environment |
| Lack of interest in or motivation to participate in activities the child enjoyed previously |
| A noticeable and/or sudden loss of appetite and/or extreme weight loss |
| Repetitively performing rituals and routines, such as handwashing |
| Play behavior and drawings that depict anxiety, fear, conflict, and a cry for help |
| Blaming themselves for events beyond their control (e.g., believing that a divorce would not have happened if they had been better behaved) |

...
example, identifies a resource for professionals, and provides
guidance on protecting the animal’s welfare.

If children are expected to acquire humane education
corcepts, then concern for an animal’s welfare must first be
modeled by the adults. To illustrate, a kindergarten teacher
who had a guinea pig as a classroom pet decided that it
would be instructive for different children/families to take
care of the guinea pig in their homes over the weekends.
This treated the helpless animal like a library book to be
borrowed rather than a sentient being. During one of these
weekends, the family dog got into the guinea pig’s enclo-
sure and killed it. The child witnessed a horrifying incident
with the dead animal hanging limply from her beloved dog’s
mouth. Worse yet, the child felt blamed because her parents
said she should have listened to them and remembered to
keep her bedroom door closed. When the parents spoke with
the teacher, they indicated that their daughter had learned
a hard lesson. Yet, if the teacher truly had compassion for
the guinea pig, she would not have permitted it to be passed
around and vulnerable to unintentional harm or even deliber-
ate neglect/abuse. If the parents had accepted full respon-
sibility for the animal, they would not have expected a child to
be infallible in taking care of the guinea pig. Now the teacher
had to tell the class that their pet would not be returning
to school and children wondered aloud what happened.
Because animal welfare was disregarded in this situation,
none of the goals of humane education were met.

Similar considerations pertain when animals are part of
a counseling effort. The professionals seeking to implement
animal-assisted counseling need to embrace the precepts of
humane organizations; namely, the interconnectedness of
human rights, animal protection, and environmental sustain-
ability (Jalongo, 2013). Each of the organizations in Table 3
is committed to promoting kindness, teaching respect, and
fostering compassion for all living things. All of them
include valuable resources suitable for adults and children.

Conversely, when properly implemented, animal-assisted
counseling and mental health services can provide the fol-
lowing benefits identified by VanFleet and Fa-Thompson
(2017):

1. The natural interest that children have in animals often
   helps them to open up quickly.
2. Children can form healthy attachment relationships
   with the animal as well as the therapist and other peo-
ple.
3. Children learn appropriate behaviors with animals, and
   consequently, with other children and people—both of
   which support the goals of humane education.
4. Animals tend to provide unconditional acceptance and
   communicate in concrete ways that children under-
stand, such as approaching them, seeking their atten-
 tion, and expressing affection.
5. Working with carefully selected animals under the
   therapist’s supervision can develop children’s empathy,
   sharing, and caregiving capabilities.
6. Working together with an animal can build various
   skills and bolster children’s confidence in themselves.
7. Animals can motivate children’s participation in ac-
  ademic tasks, physical activity, and intervention strate-
gies/programs.
8. The presence of a well-mannered animal can serve to
   calm children emotionally and physiologically as well
   as reduce anxieties/fears.
9. With the animal as social support, children may feel
   safer about sharing their worries or traumatic experi-
ences.
10. The resilience and gentle ways of special animals can
   support children who have been abused, neglected, or
   rejected to find new hope.

Animals in the Practice of Mental Health
Professionals: Caveats and Contributions

Mental health professionals who successfully incorporate
animals into their work view those animals as their part-
ners rather than a novelty or a “tool” (Menna et al., 2019).
The animals are treated with respect, their human part-
ners consider the animal’s needs when making decisions,
and the human intervenes if interactions cause distress
(Bremhorst & Mills, 2021). For example, while visiting
a child with autism spectrum disorder, the child grabbed
the dog’s front leg and started to squeeze it tightly, caus-
ing the dog to be fearful. In a situation such as this one,
the professional responsible for the dog must terminate
the interaction in the interest of protecting it from harm.
All respected therapy animal organizations and those who
oversee such programs emphasize that the owner/_handler
of a therapy animal must be observant and function as an
advocate for their animal (VonLintel & Bruneau, 2021).
A “one health” perspective in which the wellbeing of both
human and nonhuman animals is taken into considera-
tion must guide professional decision making (Pinillos
et al., 2016). Those responsible for the animals need to
educate others about the animals’ requirements and rea-
sonable expectations for the animals. Animals are not
equipment to be shuttled about and overscheduled; they
are living, breathing creatures with needs, likes, dislikes,
and individual characteristics. Those interacting the ani-
mals—particularly children—should be diplomatically
informed about these issues and coached in how to treat
the animals in developmentally appropriate ways, such
as “How would you feel if a stranger came running up to
you screaming and then patted you on the head or gave
you a big hug? What about if a bunch of people touched

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| Effect and Evidence                                                                 | Example                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Resources for Counselors and Teachers                                                                 | Animal Welfare                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reduce stress and promote psychological wellbeing (Gee, 2021); Decrease anxiety   | A 5-year-old child has separation anxiety when attending school for the first time as a kindergartner. The school counselor works with the child’s teacher who has a litter box trained rabbit in the classroom. Opportunities to interact with the bunny motivate the child to attend school and have more positive attitudes | Rabbits in the classroom (Molinar et al., 2020)                                                   | Welfare of rabbits (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 2019)                   |
| about new situations (Friedmann, 2019; McCune et al., 2014)                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                       |                                                                                                   |
| Encourage participation in learning activities (Gee et al., 2017) such as reading    | A first grader who transfers into a new school midyear is a reluctant reader who and sometimes refuses to read aloud. The school counselor considers it to be a case of reading anxiety. When given the choice of repeating first grade or attending summer school, the family chooses the latter, but their son resists because he just “isn’t good at” reading. It is not until he finds out that the therapy dogs will be there that he eagerly attends, practices reading aloud, and improves his reading skills | Reading anxiety (Jalongo, 2005; Jalongo & Hirsh, 2010; Piccolo et al., 2017); Effects on reading proficiency and attitudes toward reading (Linder et al., 2018) | Welfare of therapy dogs (Fry, 2021; Glenk & Foltin, 2021; McConnell & Fine, 2019; Mills et al., 2019) |
| aloud (Levinson et al., 2017)                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                       |                                                                                                   |
| Improve behavior and social functioning within the classroom for typically developing | A kindergarten girl from China whose parents are enrolled in graduate studies feels that peers do not yet accept her. When asked about school, their daughter says, “I wish I had a little friend to eat lunch with.” The counselor and teacher notice that she is interested in the classroom guinea pig, so they pair her with other students to care for the animal and maintain an observational journal. Friendships form and the child’s wish for a lunchtime companion is fulfilled | Animal-assisted therapy in classrooms (Brelsford et al., 2017); Guinea pigs in the classroom (O’Haire et al., 2015; Todd, 2018); Small and furry “pocket pets” that counselors include in their sessions (Flom, 2006) | Standards of practice for animal-assisted interventions (Pet Partners, 2021); Pets in the workplace (Pet Partners, 2022) |
| children and those with special needs (Kirnan et al., 2020; O’Haire, 2013; O’Haire  |                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                       |                                                                                                   |
| et al., 2014)                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                       |                                                                                                   |
| Practice physical control and promote feelings of confidence and competence (White- | A counselor works with an 8-year-old girl with mobility issues and low self-esteem. The child is fascinated by horses, so her mother wants to involve the second grader in therapeutic horseback riding. The counselor puts the mother in contact with a reputable local program and the child participates enthusiastically. She bonds with one horse, in particular, and has a sense of pride in her ability to control such a powerful animal | Equine-assisted therapy (Lattella & Abrams, 2019; VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2017)                    | Welfare of horses in therapeutic contexts (Fry, 2021)                                                |
| Lewis, 2020)                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                       |                                                                                                   |
you at the same time? How about if you felt crowded and squished into a small space? Well, dogs don’t like those things either. They like it better when you are quiet, move slowly, take turns meeting them, give them some space, and let them come to you.”

Animal-assisted counseling is not the best choice for every child and situation. There are many professional decisions that need to be made and possible negatives to consider prior to implementing an intervention.

**Caveats About Involving Animals in Therapeutic Interventions**

- Issues of trust, intimacy and confidentiality may surface
- Evaluation of the “goodness of fit” between client and animal can be challenging
- Handler or animal could be a distraction from the planned intervention activities
- If the mental health professional is not the animal’s handler, collaboration and collegiality between therapist and handler must be developed
- Animal could disrupt therapist/client relationship rather than build rapport
- Clients might engage with the animal’s handler rather than the counselor (Adapted from MacNamara et al., 2019).

Successfully integrating animals into the therapeutic alliance between mental health professionals and young children demands forethought, planning, preparation, and thoughtful implementation (Fine, 2019). Furthermore, all stakeholders must be considered—the individual child/family, the professionals, other adults associated with the program (such as therapy dog handlers), and the specific species/animal. Table 4 offers recommendations to mental health professionals seeking to incorporate animals into the therapeutic alliance with young children.

**Conclusion: Future Trends**

Young children’s need for the support of different types of mental health professionals can vary widely. Traumatic experiences and profound loss often require more intensive, individualized help. The following situation with 5-year-old Max offers an example:

Kindergartner Max’s father is an elementary school teacher and a big ice hockey fan. His family sometimes attend games together and Max’s older brother is part of a children’s hockey team. After the city’s professional hockey team acquires a top-ranked player, Max and his father go to the arena early, hoping to get an autograph. In a tragic
Max’s father slips on the ice while approaching the hockey player, falls over backwards, hits his head, and is fatally injured. The traumatic experience of witnessing his father’s death results in major mental health issues for Max and he is undergoing individual treatment with a mental health professional.
Although their loss was not as profound, other students and staff at the school were affected by the terrible incident as well. The principal obtained the necessary permissions and enlisted the support of four doctoral candidates from the nearby university who are experienced mental health professionals. This group has therapy dogs who are trained, tested, registered, and insured through the national group, Alliance of Therapy Dogs. All four of the students are licensed mental health professionals who continue to work with families and are now pursuing doctoral degrees in Psychology. The therapy dog group is their community service project, so their services are provided to the school free of charge. These doctoral candidates in Psychology have found that the presence of the animals “breaks the ice” and encourages people to share their thoughts, concerns, and feelings. Many times, when this occurs, it is while people are gently stroking the dog’s fur.

As Max’s situation and that of his school illustrates, animals do not replace the need for human helpers; rather, the presence of the animals provides a different focus and a break from routines that can increase the effectiveness of mental health interventions. This vignette illustrates how animals can partner with mental health professionals to provide a unique form of social support.

To summarize, animals can support the therapeutic alliance between a counselor or other mental health professional and a child in at least four important ways.

1. **Initiate interaction** There is research evidence that people accompanied by animals are perceived as more approachable, friendly, and likeable (Bould et al., 2018; Rossbach & Wilson, 1992). Boris Levinson (1997), who is widely regarded as the founder of child-oriented psychotherapy, referred to animals as a “social lubricant”. The nonhumans become the focus of attention and conversation and alleviate some of the pressures that can be associated with interpersonal interactions between humans.

2. **Provide supplemental social support** Bonds with animals can function as alternative forms of social support. During COVID-19 lockdowns, for example, many people turned to their family pets for emotional support (Jalongo, 2021). Young children, in particular, personify animals and regard them as peers, playmates, and friends (Melson & Fine, 2019). Thus, if children are experiencing negative emotions (e.g., anxiety or fear), attempting to do something for the first time, or working at a challenging task then the animals can buffer some of those strong emotions (Gee et al., 2021; Kertes et al., 2017).

3. **Intervene following a crisis situation** After a disaster such as a fire, flood, hurricane, explosion, school shooting, or death of a student, trained therapy dogs may be brought in by counselors (Greenbaum, 2006; VanFleet, 2018). Organizations such as HOPE (2020) and K9 First Responders (2022), for example, dispatch trained handler/therapy dog teams, free of charge, to schools following a disaster, crisis, catastrophe, or episode of violence. During COVID, they offered virtual visits online.

4. **Function as co-therapists with mental health professionals.** At the highest level of collaboration between the counselor and the animal, the animal is fully integrated into the treatment plan (VanFleet et al., 2019). For example, a child who struggles with self-esteem may be in sessions with a play therapist who plans opportunities for a child to work with a carefully selected and trained dog or horse. As the animal responds to cues given by the child, it helps to build the child’s confidence. During animal assisted play therapy (AAPT), the opportunity to direct the actions of a mellow draft horse in a UK program provided children with a sense of power and control while the animals functioned as co-therapists (VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2017).

So, what is next on the horizon for HAI, counseling, and young children? There are at least five trends. The first is that early childhood educators can expect to see increases in mental health issues presented by their students. Previous research on pandemics, as well as the very latest studies of the effects of COVID-19, suggest that these crises have deleterious effects on peoples’ psychological wellbeing (Jalongo, 2021; Mental Health America, 2021). Many children have experienced significant losses during the crisis and nearly all children have encountered major disruptions to their lives and education. Nevertheless, misconceptions and social stigma associated with asking for or participating in mental health services persist in society. Bringing other species into the therapeutic alliance can increase the appeal of these services, make mental health professionals more approachable in the eyes of their clients, and enhance the effectiveness of such interventions. At the same time, animal-assisted counseling offers an opportunity for children to internalize the goals of humane education.

A second critical issue is the selection of suitable animals as partners, their preparation for the role, and thoughtful attention to their wellbeing (Fine et al., 2019; Hediger et al., 2019; Ng, 2021; Peralta & Fine, 2021). Again, “one health”—the concept that the welfare among varied species is interrelated—should guide all animal-assisted counseling efforts (Hediger et al., 2019). It also calls for higher standards in the training of the animals most frequently chosen as therapeutic partners—dogs and horses. A third key consideration is thorough preparation of mental health professionals who seek to include animals in the therapeutic alliance. During the process of writing this article, the American Psychological Associations’ Sect. 13 Division 17 that focuses on the human–animal bond launched a new organization called.
the Association of Animal-Assisted Intervention Professionals (AAAIP) (2022b). The group offers an online evaluation process that, when successfully completed, yields the Animal-Assisted Intervention Specialist Certification—the C-AAIS. Professionals from various fields, including mental health, education, physical health, and others can add this endorsement to their credentials. Indeed, some are calling for a specialized credentialing process that goes beyond the assessment of knowledge to include direct observation of professionals’ skills and practicum experiences in animal-assisted interventions (Hartwig, 2020).

Another trend in the field is the call for systematic data collection rather than relying on informal anecdotal accounts of successful outcomes (McCune et al., 2014). Such evidence needs to be multidisciplinary, including medical research that assesses hormonal changes associated with HAI, not only for the people (Powell et al., 2019) but also for the animals to determine if these interactions are beneficial or stressful. Finally, given the increases in children with stress-related mental health issues in the aftermath of COVID-19, there is growing interest in dogs, in particular, who would not just visit a school program briefly but who would accompany a mental health professional to work on a daily basis. These dogs are different from therapy dogs (who are invited to visit the school) or service dogs (trained to assist one person with a disability). Referred to as facility dogs, these animals provide a more constant presence within the school (see Jalongo et al., 2022). In their guide for educators, World Animal Protection (2016) defines humane education as “a concept that encompasses all forms of education about social justice, citizenship, environmental issues and the welfare of animals. It recognizes the interdependence of all living things” (p. 2). When it is founded on these basic principles of humane education, animal-assisted counseling for young children holds great promise as a timely and effective complementary therapy that professionals can add to their repertoire of intervention strategies.

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