Functions of animal therapy in Social Emotional Learning

Critique of two empirical studies

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Social Emotional Learning, simply referred to as SEL, is a process fulfilling five characteristic domains: recognition and management of emotions, caring and concern for others, building positive relationships, ability for making sound decisions, and handling stress effectively (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007). There are a few programs teaching children at schools how to access the SEL and function better in all five domains. Teachers who spend time teaching SEL and make their classroom a friendly, student-focused environment, have better long-term success with classroom management (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Students, in fact, develop all five characteristics of SEL providing that the teaching and atmosphere continues regardless of teacher changes in a student’s school career. One of the newer developments that has not been much discussed in SEL studies, but should belong to SEL strategies, is animal assistance and therapy in schools. Despite of a lack of popularity so far, animal therapy has been used for a long time. “Animal-assisted therapy was first recorded in England in 1792, where mentally ill patients were given small animals for which to care” (Oian, 2007, ii). Some researchers today trust animal involvement in children’s success. One of them is Lori Friesen from the University of Alberta, who has been working with dog-assisted literacy with young children since 2010 with successful results. Another one is Mona J. Sams et al., the occupational therapist from Virginia, USA, who described her success in incorporating llamas in occupational therapy for autistic children.

The research in animal-assisted literacy programs from Canada, Australia, China, India, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom fascinated Lori Friesen, but the main drive in her own future research came from observing her dog Tango with her own young students. She noted:

Beyond being fun, the sessions offered children a unique and

familiar form of social, emotional and academic support in the

classroom. Students sat close to each other and together would

pet and touch the dog. The dog acted as a soft social bridge

between students and focused their attention on the task at hand.

(Friesen, 2010, p. 16)

Based on this statement, her observation included all five aspects of SEL. The students formed a tight, family-like structure with this animal catalyst.

Following her observation and data gathered from international research, Lori Friesen and Esther Delisle designed and ran their own research two years later. Dogs were chosen for this research based on their “nonjudgmental and highly social nature” (Friesen & Delisle, 2012, p. 103). Five animal-assisted programs were chosen in four French-speaking schools in Eastern Canada. Each program took an average of seven to eight months. 45 children participated in the study (18 girls and 27 boys) with three children in grade 5, 16 children in grade 3, and 26 children in grades 1-2. Although most children were below grade level in literacy, there was a large range in interest and ability in reading. The dogs involved in the study were: Prince, a 7-year-old golden retriever; Matisse, a 7-year-old female husky; and Lucky, a 4-year-old bichon frise. Additionally, one program featured a 4-year-old guinea pig named Oreo. Each child was involved in the study in one to two half hours per session per week. The adult supervising the session would act as a translator to the dog’s feelings and needs. When a dog would wag its tail, the adult companion would say something like: “’You’re so happy to see your friend, John, aren’t you? Yes, you are’” (Friesen & Delisle, 2012, p. 104). Similar interactions and remarks built feelings of comfort and empathy in students. For example, children would make an independent decision to bring water for their dog companions. In addition, to project a dog’s hyperactivity to the hyperactivity of an ADHD student, the adult would talk to a dog to make it relax and sit down to get ready to listen to a story. Addressing an animal instead of a student motivated a student to settle down to read. The environment was safe and non-judgmental. The student did not feel threatened that the adult may be actually aiming to relax the student and bring him back to attention – it was not personal – it was the dog’s “fault” for not paying attention. At the end, the student praised the dog for the good behaviour of settling down without realizing that he settled down himself. The presence of the dog created the sense of belonging, pride, and safety – the essential environment for teaching SEL. Finally, the children’s reading and writing skills, along with motivation, empathy and good judgment, improved. “’Friends of Matisse do not fight! They argue and they settle or they leave each other alone’ one student said” (Friesen & Delisle, 2012, p. 106). This academic and social improvement is not surprising because once “schools implement high-quality SEL programs and approaches effectively, academic achievement of children increases, incidence of problem behaviors decreases, the relationships that surround each child are improved, and the climate of classroom and schools changes for the better” (Elias, 2006, p. 5). Dog-assisted literacy program described above meets the SEL criteria. As a matter of fact, in a way it is similar to the “Roots of Empathy” program, in which children in a classroom are exposed to a baby visitor that they bond with. Both babies and animals have a similar effect on children’s reaction and contentment level. With the proper guidance of the program designer, both programs can achieve the goal of broadening empathy among other SEL skills (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2011). There is evidence of SEL connection to animal therapy provided by programs such as Reading to Rover and R.E.A.D. (Reading Education Assistance Dogs), both popular in the United States. Dogs break down social barriers; moreover, children without disabilities are more likely to interact with children with disabilities, who are accompanied by a dog (Oian, 2007).

The other successful research that includes members of the animal kingdom, is a pilot investigation in occupational therapy with autistic children. Children with autism have sensory problems disallowing them to function properly, as in stress-free, in the environment (Sams et al., 2006). Occupational therapists have come up with a lot of strategies to meet these children’s needs. In this study, however, Sams and her colleagues did something new and thus far unconventional. They compared two different styles of occupational therapy in a group of children.. Their standard group had the usual OT tools such as swings, teeter-totters, clay, toys, balls, artwork, puzzles, and more. The experimental group, to meet the same sensory needs, used llamas and other animals. They were riding in wagons pulled by llamas, riding on llamas’ backs, guiding llamas through obstacle courses, brushing and feeding llamas, loading and unloading llamas, training llamas, petting rabbits and dogs. The goal of using animals in OT was to make autistic children more social and communicative. Twenty-two children participated in the study; two had a secondary diagnosis of cerebral palsy. The study took 15 weeks and the length of a session was approximately 26 minutes for standard sessions and 29 minutes for experimental sessions. The results in both verbal communication and social interaction were significantly higher in the animal driven sessions. “Interactions with animals, with their less complex, less subtle, and more predictable social clues, may provide a medium for persons with autism to learn to interact with other sentient beings in a more easily understood yet consistently natural context” (Sams et al., 2006, p. 272). Once again, animals provided a social, predictable, safe environment suitable for developing SEL beginnings even for an autistic person. Further study has been suggested which would incorporate animals specifically with autistic children.

Whereas a biocentric perspective would not view interactions

with animals as inherently less meaningful than interactions with

humans, this perspective may not be universally accepted. However,

qualitative observations of children’s behavior during sessions

did not suggest that the increase in social behavior was entirely

accounted for by interactions exclusively with animals, but that

instead the children were also more motivated to interact socially

with the humans present (perhaps to gain access to animals, or to

talk about animals).

(Sams et al., 2006, p. 273)

There is some critique in using animals as means to various types of therapy in public settings including schools, hospitals, libraries, and psychological clinics. For example, in the Middle East and Southeast Asia animals are considered unsanitary and do not get the same respect as the beloved pets in parts of Europe or North America. Parents of immigrant children from these parts of the world may or may not agree with animal-assisted therapy. Another controversy is children’s phobias with dogs and other critters. Oian argues that both reasons, as valid as they are, may need time and educating the public about the obvious level of success in children’s educations and SEL skills (Oian, 2007). Parents of immigrant children will be able to see their children’s success and may change their convictions. Carefully-introduced children to the well-trained dogs, even following a bad experience with a dog, may reduce or even lose their phobias and become part of an animal-assisted program. Overall research, however limited, is very promising so far. Even Sigmund Freud used his dog Jo-Fi in his therapy sessions. Freud observed his dog’s reactions to a level of tension of his patients. If Jo-Fi sat close to his patients, it was assumed that a patient’s tension level was less than when the dog chose to lay far away from the patient.

In their article focusing on resilience, Masten and Motti-Stefanidi focus on the importance of relationships and their fundamental function in growing resilience (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2009). Animals through the ages have been perfect companions and due to a lack of judgment and the unconditional love they express to their owners, they can be very therapeutic. Pitt Meadows Secondary School’s Special Education Behavioural Classroom had a dog named Homer. Students in this classroom came from different levels of experience. Most of them struggled with depression leading to loneliness, withdrawal, and poor academic progress. They were lacking resilience. However, as I observed them interacting with Homer, students were physically transformed. They would talk to him, feed him, use him as a pillow (with his full permission) and smiled, laughed, and joked with their classmates. The transformation was fascinating. Homer represented that much-needed relationship that these students needed to build their resilience.

Battistich and his colleagues comment: “a caring school community may be particularly beneficial for our most disadvantaged students” (Battistich et al., 1997, p. 149). In this PMSS classroom the example of having Homer as an addition to the school’s climate has been very successful. As a teacher at Westview Secondary School, I have taken a friend’s Mexican Chihuahua named Tarzan into the classroom for two months. Not only my special needs students benefited, but the whole school climate changed when students were motivated to work on their academics in order to take Tarzan for his “bathroom” breaks and they seemed to respect each other more in the dog’s presence. A year after Tarzan had to go back to his owner, students still frequently asked when he would be coming back. Most importantly, principals of both PMSS and Westview saw the benefits of dogs in classes, meaning they could observe SEL in progress and believed in the teachers’ competence and strategy. Such trust suggests the safe, friendly school environment meeting SEL’s goals. Possibly, some biological changes were happening in the youth interacting with those dogs.

Indeed, just as cortisol rises during stressful situations (Gunnar et al., 2003), oxytocin, another, much more positive hormone, is raised while petting animals. “Neurobiology has shown that the production of oxytocin in humans is stimulated by interactions with animals, creating the potential for greater relaxation and increased empathy and engagement” (VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2010, p. 4). In other words, just as SEL research shows neurobiological changes in people’s brains and improvement in people’s functioning, so is animal therapy neurologically- based. Oxytocin enables people and animals “to read emotions, to seek physical contact and companionship, and to experience relaxation when in each other’s presence” (VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2010, p. 5). What is also fascinating is that both humans’ and dogs’ oxytocin levels rise significantly during the petting session (VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2010).

Taking into consideration that animal therapy and animal-assisted education fulfill all five goals of Social Emotional Learning, improve both classroom environment and educational and social content, are somewhat parallel to the “Roots of Empathy”, are crucial in building resilience, and have a neurological base, there is no reason why they should not be used as SEL strategies. The success of both animal-assisted literacy and llama involvement in occupational therapy proves that using animals in fostering SEL is crucial. There should be much more research and public education in this field, but so far results are very promising. Among many benefits in both mental health treatment and classroom supports, Cynthia Chandler, a Professor in the Counseling Program in the Department of Counseling, Development and Higher Education at the University of North Texas, summarizes that integrating animals into the classroom setting includes “incorporating an attitude of kindness and compassion, learning about nurturance, practicing loyalty and responsibility” (Chandler, 2001, p. 2). She further states that there is “a generalization from humane attitudes toward animals to human-directed empathy. Thus, emotional connections made with animals can transfer to more empathic attitudes towards other persons” (Chandler, 2001, p. 2). Perhaps in the future, the trained, well-behaved animals, animals that enjoy this Samaritan profession, will be widely recognized as SEL providers.

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