

Psychotherapy for Children

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Abstract

Group Psychotherapy (GP) for children is a well-established practice and was found to be highly effective, but we are still a long way from understanding the mechanisms of therapeutic effects. The effectiveness of group psychotherapy is enabled by therapeutic factors such as group cohesion, altruism, and social skill learning, as well as strengthening secure attachment. In parallel, the research literature on the human-animal bond is replete with evidence that animals increase trust, sociability, relaxation, and serve as secure attachment figures. These qualities of animals correspond to the significant therapeutic factors for children, so there is reason to expect that animals may contribute to group psychotherapy by increasing therapeutic factors. Animal assisted psychotherapy has been found to have some efficacy as it is done on an individual basis, but in the field of AAGP, as known so far, there is no theory, conceptualization or study of the properties, even though AAGP is widely used with children, with no organized method. In this dissertation, I aim to establish a theoretical framework for Animal Assisted Group Psychotherapy (AAGP) for children, by conceptualizing the effective methods and processes, and assessing the role of the therapeutic animal in the treatment.

The dissertation combines a qualitative part that was aimed to set the basic foundation of the meaning of therapy for patients, the processes that enable these, and the contribution of therapeutic animals; and quantitative methodology that aimed to extend and strengthen the findings of the foremost part. The qualitative part was based on semi-structured interviews, observations and grounded theory analysis and was based on perceptions of 15 caregivers, 42 patients and 26 observations. In addition, the qualitative part mapped the challenges and ways of in AAGP. The quantitative part showed the connections between global attachment style, attachment to the therapeutic animal, and group cohesion, by analyzing conventional questionnaires given to 168 patients. In addition, we examined the patient-animal interactions in sessions, as reported by therapists, and the connections between these and the measures described. The study focused on children who were referred to AAGP due to emotional or social difficulties and received therapy at one of three settings: therapy room, petting zoo or zoo.

The analyses of the interviews with therapists revealed two main methods of

AAGP: a 'Flexible Approach', in which a separate activity with different animals may occur (located usually at the petting zoo or zoo); and a 'Constructed Approach', in which the therapist brings the therapeutic animal, and joint activities are planned around it (mostly in the therapy room). The meanings of therapy for children, as arose from interviews with 42 children, were categorized according to themes: 1. Enjoyment; 2. Strengthening self-esteem; and 3. Strengthening sociability. Those meanings of therapy were linked to their therapeutic processes. Group cohesion contributed to enjoyment. The contribution of the therapeutic animal induced relaxation and excitement alongside the motivation to work in cooperation. The therapeutic processes allowing strengthening self-esteem were mainly the experiences of concrete success, while the animals allowed these, by being both the sources of fear and the motivation to overcome the challenges. The therapeutic processes that were found to improve sociability were strengthening secure attachment patterns, and improving empathy. Animals allowed practicing and balancing relations: for the avoidant attachment, animals were the subject of altruistic deeds; whereas for the anxiety-attachment, animals were regulated control factors. The constant care that is taken through AAGP enabled improvement of empathy, an important element when strengthening social skills.

Additionally, the challenges posed by the animals to AAGP were mapped: I. Possible damage to the safe place of the patient – due to experience of rejection, or a possibility of harming the therapeutic animal. II. The therapist's difficulties were mainly the lack of control, particularly injuries and deaths to animals, but also when there was conflict between concerns for animals or patients. III. Difficulties in organizations. The therapists dealt with the difficulties by establishing clear rules that prevented the emergence of difficulties or by processing the events and creating therapeutic insights. The quantitative findings of the dissertation strengthen the notion that animals allow practice in attachment, by indicating a positive correlation between patterns of global attachment, and animal attachment. The qualitative finding whereby interacting with animals strengthens the group cohesion, were reinforced by the findings in which a significant negative correlation was found between avoidant attachment to animals

The Role of Animals in Group connections between behavior in therapy and theoretical indices: avoidant attachment to animals was found to be connected positively to shorter and negative interaction with animals, and anxiety attachment to animals is positively related to longer, stable and positive interaction. Group cohesion was higher as the interaction with animals was longer.

The findings regarding children's perceptions about the meaning of therapy strengthen the understanding of the universal meaning of therapy for children, and reinforce the trend that sees the patient as a self-healer. The therapeutic processes found here are also consistent with studies of other therapies, which strengthened the argument that animal assisted psychotherapy takes place like other psychotherapies. One finding not found in the other studies is the contribution of therapy to strengthening self-esteem. Analysis of the AAGP therapeutic processes showed that the empowerment is achieved through processes of overcoming rejection from therapeutic animals. This finding may indicate a major contribution of the therapeutic animal, the ability to enhance and strengthen the patients by allowing a concrete experience of success. Another theoretical contribution is the understanding of the mechanism through which animals strengthen secure attachment.

The practical contribution of the research is mainly by defining two models of AAGP that will allow clinicians the choice of how to work, and highlight the guidelines for desirable therapeutic processes, the ways to cope with challenges and to avoid typical pitfalls. The organization of diverse phenomena into a single theory may establish uniformity of AAGP and support further research without intervening factors to study the effectiveness of such treatment. Overall, the uniqueness AAGP is that it manages to combine concrete success events and attachment strengthening, resulting in the improvement of self-esteem, social skills and empathy.