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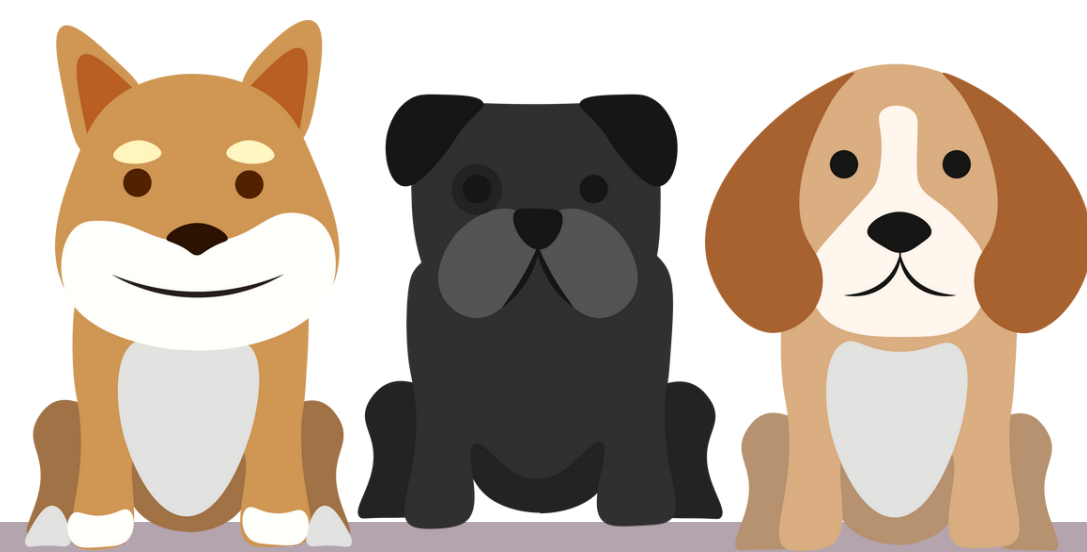
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Furry Friends and Brighter Futures: Enhancing the Life Skills of Toddlers with Autism Through Animal-Assisted Therapy

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Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) presents significant challenges, particularly in the domains of social interaction and communication. ASD adversely affects a person's ability to form meaningful relationships, interact with others, and navigate social contexts effectively (National Institute of Mental Health, 2022). If functionality in these areas is not optimized, people with ASD will encounter difficulties in transitioning to independent living, notably in the areas of pursuing an education, securing employment, and ultimately establishing themselves as functional in society (Posar & Visconti, 2019).

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a therapeutic intervention that involves the utilization of animals to promote the emotional, social, cognitive, and physical well-being of individuals with acute or chronic diseases (Cherry-Sánchez et al., 2018). Introducing animal-assisted therapy during toddlerhood is likely to contribute to the development of these life skills, which, in turn, will improve independent living and quality of life outcomes.



IRB:

Personal and identifying information will be left out for the protection of participants. This research proposal will be IRB approved at Dominican University of California.

Hypothesis

Adding weekly AAT to ABA therapy for toddlers diagnosed with ASD will improve social, communication, and behavioral skills.

Method

Quasi-experimental Design

Participants

- Toddlers aged 12 to 36 months, receiving ABA therapy at a community center and diagnosed with ASD by a licensed healthcare professional

Materials & Measurements

- Demographic questionnaire, Communication and Symbolic Behavior Scales (CSBS), Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales, 3rd Edition (VABS-3), and Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule, 2nd Edition (ADOS-2)

Procedure

- Demographic questionnaire and pre-assessment tests (CSBS, VABS-3, ADOS-2) will be administered to assess baseline life skills
- The control group will be receiving ABA therapy at Site A
- The experimental group will be receiving AAT in conjunction with ABA therapy at Site B
 - AAT intervention period of 12 weeks, occurring once a week, with sessions lasting 30 to 60 minutes.
- Post-intervention follow-up assessments (CSBS, VABS-3, ADOS-2) will be conducted to reevaluate life skills and compare with baseline

Results

- Paired-sample t-tests will be used to assess for statistically significant differences between the pre-assessment and post-assessment scores for each group ($p\text{-value} < 0.05$)
- Independent-sample t-tests will be used to evaluate whether changes in social, communication, and behavioral skills differ significantly between groups and subgroups ($p\text{-value} < 0.05$)

Conclusion

If the results demonstrate a statistically significant enhancement in social, communication, and behavioral skills within the experimental group compared to the control group, we can confidently reject the null hypothesis. The results would also suggest that AAT, as a complementary approach, has substantial potential for improving life skills. Such findings will undoubtedly inspire additional research into integrating AAT with other ASD therapies.

References:

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