

Canine-assisted occupational therapy for children on the autism spectrum

Hill, J., Ziviani, J., Driscoll, C. & Cawdell-Smith, J. (2020)

Due to the difficulty autistic children experience with social behaviours and communication, it has been suggested they can display difficulty engaging with people and functional tasks impacting participation within therapy sessions. Canine-assisted therapy has been suggested as a possible addition to occupational therapy sessions that may assist to facilitate engagement with the therapist and the therapy process. In spite of the increased interest in canine-assisted therapy with children on the autism spectrum there remains minimal research into the efficacy of including a therapy dog into services such as occupational therapy.

The aim of this research was to evaluate the effect of canine-assisted occupational therapy with autistic children between the ages of four years, and six years, eleven months. In order to achieve this aim a pilot randomised control trial was completed in order to determine the impact of canine-assisted occupational therapy on the on-task behaviour and goal achievement of autistic children. To further our understanding two qualitative studies were also completed exploring the experience of parents and therapists retrospectively involved in canine-assisted occupational therapy sessions with children on the autism spectrum.

Results from the pilot randomised control trial found that participation within the canine-assisted occupational therapy sessions had a small but positive impact on the on-task behaviours and goal attainment for the children involved.

Findings from both the parent and therapist studies found that inclusion of a therapy dog into occupational therapy sessions appeared to accelerate the children's motivation to engage with the therapist and within the therapy session. However, it was acknowledged by both the parents and therapists that it was the therapist's ability to direct this motivation towards goal directed, occupation focused interventions that assisted the children to progress towards their therapy goals.

The overall findings of this thesis suggest that the inclusion of a therapy dog into occupational therapy session with autistic children may have a positive impact on child motivation and engagement within therapy, however, further research is required to support these pilot results.

For further information on the results of the study please see below publications.

- Hill, J., Ziviani, J., Driscoll, C. & Cawdell-Smith, J. (2019) Can canine-assisted interventions affect the social behaviours of children on the autism spectrum? A systematic review. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. 6(1), 12-25. doi: 10.1007/s40489-018-0151-7
- Hill, J., Ziviani, J., Driscoll, C. & Cawdell-Smith, J. (2019) Canine assisted occupational therapy for children on the autism spectrum: challenges in practice. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*. 83(4). 215-219. doi: 10.1177/0308022619858851
- Hill, J., Ziviani, J., Cawdell-Smith, J. & Driscoll, C. (2019) Canine assisted occupational therapy: Protocol of a pilot randomised control trial for children on the autism spectrum. *Open Journal of Paediatrics*. 9. 199-217. doi:10.4236/ojped.2019.
- Hill, J., Ziviani, J. & Driscoll, C. (2020) Canine assisted occupational therapy: A parents' perspective. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*. 00. 1-10. doi: 10.1111/1440-1630.12659
- Hill, J., Ziviani, J., Driscoll, C. & Cawdell-Smith, J. (2020) Canine assisted occupational therapy: A randomised control trial for children on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. 00. 1-15. doi: 10.1007/s10803-020-04483-7
- Hill, J., Ziviani, J. & Driscoll, C. (2020) "The connection just happens": Therapists' perspectives of canine assisted occupational therapy for children on the autism spectrum. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal* – In Press