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Animal assisted therapy and children with autism spectrum disorder: A literature review

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Introduction & Aim: Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) is a kind of therapy that includes animals in therapeutic activities to promote physical, psychosocial and cognitive functioning to patients, especially for children. The positive outcomes of interacting with animals include reduced stress and isolation and increased social interaction and connection. This review evaluated the effectiveness for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), especially on the sociological effects, language and communication abilities, level of ASD symptom severity and problem behavior.

Methodology: Electronic databases including American Psychological Association, Google Scholar, PsyInfo, PUBMED, ResearchGate and Yahoo were searched from inception until 4/2017. Studies included children who are aged between 5 to 14 years, irrelevant of gender and race and fulfill the criteria of ASD in the baseline of the study. Quality appraisal was done and data were analyzed.

Results & Discussion: Five studies with total of 189 participants who were between four to thirteen years old that received different forms of AAT were included. The studies included in this review incorporated with three types of animals: Horse, guinea pig and dog. Included studies have shown significant positive effects of the therapy in the effectiveness and outcomes of AAT on the sociological effects and ASD symptom severity and mixed result on language and communication abilities and problem behavior. There were several limitations for threatening the validity of the review while summarizing the findings, including gender imbalance, duration and frequency difference and assessment difference among the studies.

Conclusion: Reported outcomes provide preliminary support for the concept of AAT for children with ASD, through increased social interaction and social skills as well as reduced ASD symptom severity. Further researches need to be conducted to examine the overall outcomes and efficacy of AAT continuously and comprehensively for children with ASD.

Biography

Law Po Ling is a graduate of Bachelor of Science in Health Care of the Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong. Her research interests include complementary alternative therapies, disease management and child health.

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