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## **Dog therapy – selected issues and suggestions**

### **Introduction**

Since prehistoric times animals have lived among people. At first, it was related to the supply of food by them, but one of the mammalian species – the dog was quickly recognized by humans. His amazing smell, agility, speed and obedience were the traits used by hunters. The dog ceased to serve the man only for hunting, slowly began to become his friend. When analyzing our coexistence with a dogs, one can notice how the use and treatment of these animals has changed over the course of common history. With the development of civilization, domestic dogs lost their usefulness in favor of being a companion and the best human friend. In recent years, dogs have also been used in Poland and around the world in alternative methods of supporting child development. One of these method is a dog therapy, otherwise known as kynotherapy or therapy with the dog participation. Dog therapy, as a method, uses dogs for multi-profile improvement of the behavior of children and adults. In dog therapy, not only people with developmental deficits in the physical, mental or emotional sphere can participate, but also healthy people. Therapeutic role of the animal

### **Conditions for dog therapy**

Almost every child wants to have some pet at some point. For parents, this is obviously associated with additional duties, because the child can not immediately take care of the pet himself. However, it is worth buying a live friend for your child, because it will gain a lot thanks to it. Being with animals has an extremely beneficial effect on people. Children, adults, the elderly, healthy and sick people – for each of us an animal can be a doctor, friend or psychologist. Nowadays, dogs kept in homes as human companions are some kind of psychological tools that support human beings. Their basic task is to show good emotions. It is said that a dog is a wolf detained in an early, youthful stage of development, for which joy, play, exchange of emotions, willingness to subjugate and the tendency to experiment are characteristic. This basic feature of dogs is perceived by people as an unconditional acceptance and

attachment, serving primarily the support of children, lonely and disabled people. Often, we do not realize this, but a beloved that enriches life, makes it happier. In return for love and care, the animal gives us a lot of joy. Children perceive a dog as a being who loves them, brings consolation in difficult situations. It is important and worth noticing that in children's perception the dog is a comforter, thanks to which a any person feels less lonely. This is especially important for children with disabilities and those who have a family situation that provides a lot of stress and even trauma. Each of us has heard the proverb "Dog is man's best friend" – undoubtedly this is not an unfounded statement. Regardless of the circumstances, the dogs are loyal, they do not remember wrongs, they love unconditionally. The basic rule is that parents who are responsible for the safety of both the child and the dog are responsible for the proper relationship and contact of child with the dog.

### **Psychosocial conditions of dog therapy**

In fact, only the school-aged child is physically, socially and emotionally ready to be able to face the care of the dog. Younger children, 2–5 years old, will not be able to walk the dog for themselves or read the dog's body language. The monkey is not able to read the signals coming from the animal side by itself. Parents must therefore teach children how to handle dogs – for example, that they must not be harmed, how to feed them, how to talk to them, when dogs give warning signs and how they look like, etc. A dog can be bought for almost all ages. However, let us remember about these possibilities and preferences of the child's development. Parents must accept the fact that, at least at the beginning, the duty of full care of the dog will fall on them. This or otherwise specialist think that more early we start familiarizing our children with the dog presence. It is important that teacher propose ways of handling a pet, as a first step in adventure with our pupils.

It happens, however, that in our home an animal friend appears much earlier. Choosing the type of pet is worth paying attention to what kind of duties, in relation to it, can be fulfilled by child. Clearly defining the scope of these duties shapes the sense of responsibility for the other being in the little person – he teaches that the animal is not a toy, and contact with it is a very serious commitment. The sooner we get used to the child's presence, the better. It is important, however, that he would be accompanied by an adult parental control. As research shows, in the presence of a pet, children develop faster in the movement, emotional and social spheres – they are more open, they crawl faster and start walking. Also, the area of cognitive development gains a lot in contact with the animal – children's curiosity is stimulated, the ability to speak develops better. Agro-tourism trips are also helpful in shaping cognitive development, which allow small people to observe animals in their natural environment. The young man is convinced that animals, just like people, feel – they enjoy, grieve, anger, long for, suffer. The harm done to them hurts just as much as harm done to man. Secondly, the child realizes what the responsibility for the second existence is in reality.

The prospect of daily care, feeding, going for a walk, cleaning the animal, or spending time together with it on the play – on the one hand is interesting and

attractive, on the other it requires a lot of time and commitment. Thirdly, the child is confronted with the need to make sacrifices for the pet, such as changing weekend or holiday plans. Observing a dog, young people also learn to accept phenomena such as illness, old age or death. They acquire respect and humbleness for difficult, unpleasant and painful elements of life. Often, for the first time, they also get used to death. Therefore, the dog at home has a wide and very good influence on the social, social and psycho-emotional development of the child in many respects.

The young man discovers what friendship is, because the animal can repay in a beautiful way for the love shown to him with his attachment and following the guardian. Often, it also becomes a confidant of children's problems or secrets. A four-legged friend often gives life meaning, he pushes off sadness and depression and acts anti-depressively. Four-legged friend will help in combating stress, just hugging a happy dog, let you calm down and get rid of negative emotions. The excellent influence of dogs on children is confirmed by the fact that they have therapeutic value and are used to treat autism or childhood cerebral palsy.

### **Forms of dog therapy**

Dogotherapy is one of the forms of animal therapy (zootherapy). Recently, it is gaining more and more popularity. Media-related publicity makes this form of support the development of a disabled child become a desirable alternative form of support therapy. However, there is little documented scientific research on it. However, observations of practitioners show that this method brings enormous benefits in the rehabilitation process and improves the functioning of disabled children. Supports rehabilitation, education, and revalidation, where the stimulus for taking action is a properly trained dog, led by a qualified therapist. The mere presence of a dog surrounded by a disabled child will not bring therapeutic effects. It is primarily a qualified specialist, who also has knowledge of working with a dog, is a guarantor of well conducted dog-therapy classes. At the center of well-conducted activities should be placed a child, his strengths weaknesses and needs, but with respect for the welfare of the animal. There are two forms of therapy with the participation of animals: AAA (Animal Assisted Activities) is classes with the participation of an animal, i.e. in the case of dog therapy, it is a dog. The aim of these classes is to create emotional and tactile contact between the participant and the dog. Achieving this goal is done by stroking, cuddling, lying close to a dog, etc. These are pleasant experiences for the child, which are conducted for general relaxatio. Another form is AAT (Animal Assisted Therapy) – that is specific exercises aimed at the target, eg rehabilitation. They are characterized by an individual approach to the child needs. The proposed exercise program is to improve the participant's health; the dog is used, for example, to force the movement of a sick person. The classes conducted by the therapist are adapted to the individual needs of disabled children. This form of therapy creat great emotional reaction in the child. This is due to the disinterestedness of a dog who does not judge, does not criticize, but

accepts the child as he is. Children, wanting to satisfy their natural curiosity follow the dog, show interest in him. Direct contact with a live animal satisfies the needs of the child: the need of touch, sensitivity and closeness. Thanks to the classes with the dog, unconsciously in the child's sense, specialized rehabilitation is conducted, tailored individually to his needs. Systematic participation in properly conducted classes with the participation of a dog gives the opportunity to improve the physical and mental condition of children using this form of therapy. The role of the dog is to help in establishing emotional contact between the child and the therapist through the very presence of the animal and all that is associated with it, and then help in creating an educational, therapeutic or parental relationship. Dogotherapy:

- increases the sense of security,
- shapes perceptiveness,
- develops caring behavior,
- calms aggressive behavior.

In addition, the participation of the dog stimulates children to undertake various activities aimed at achieving specific educational, educational and social goals. The contact between a child and a pet is important not only in the case of various types of disorders. The close relation with the dog has a very positive effect on the children development and helps them to function better. First of all, it allows the development of physical activity, supports the development of coordination. It is a great way to encourage your child to get more traffic – playing with a dog in this area works perfectly and makes the child a lot of fun.

In addition, contact with the dog also stimulates the child's senses, which greatly obesses the behavior of the dog, supports the speech development (the toddler tries to give the dog commands), allows greater openness in relationships first with the animals and later, thanks to strengthening the sense of self-confidence, also with contacts with peers. Teaches independence and responsibility, effectively reduces fears and fears, relaxes, and wants to express emotions – a toddler, when playing with a dog, is completely honest and is not afraid to express his feelings loudly. The attachment between the child and the anima and tenderness, allow the young person to empathically perceive reality and sensitize it to the needs of others. Owning an animal has a beneficial effect on the development of children's social contacts. This can be seen very much in relation to the only children who are much more likely to build stronger and more binding relationships with pets than those with siblings. Children very quickly give animals trust, tenderness and love. Strong emotional bonds are built, especially when the child grows up simultaneously eg with a beloved dog who was raised at home from a puppy. Being confused with a dog's ear or his company in the absence of parents gives the child a sense of security and a real friend. The absolute acceptance and love shown by a dog to a man contributes to support and self-esteem. Such a child does not feel lonely. Animals also teach children the most difficult topics, such as passing away or losing, and thus appreciating everyone, even the most minute moments of common pranks, caresses and joy.

## **The development and prospects of dogotherapy**

The effectiveness of the positive impact of dogs on the development of social-emotional competence of children has long been confirmed by many studies. In the mid-sixties, Boris Levinson, an American child psychiatrist, was the first to put forward the theory that taking care of an animal in childhood could make him more sensitive to other people's feelings and attitudes, learn tolerance and responsibility, self-acceptance and self-control. Levinson believed that favorite animals and contact with them may be conducive to emotional development, and during times of crisis they may give support and an sense of security. He observed that this unique ability to give unconditional, non-judgmental feelings determines the therapeutic significance of animals. Contact with a dog has a beneficial effect on almost every sphere of child's development – physical, emotional, social or even intellectual. In the 1970s, in the USA and Western Europe, clinical observations intensified, proving the impact of animals, especially dogs, on improving the functioning of patients in both the physical and mental sphere. In the eighties, an American doctor MacCulloch discovered that during the contact with the dog in the human body there are certain chemical reactions that have a positive effect on the body.

The Institute for Behavior Research, which studies the relationship between man and animal, conducted a study with the University of Vienna, which showed that the presence of dogs in the school class significantly affected the social and emotional development of children participating in the study. The observed changes concerned, among other things, the reduction of aggression among the peer group, the development of empathy, the self-confidence of shy children and the decreasing dependence of children on the opinions of other people. The results of research on the influence of dogs on students of a special school showed that the satisfaction of children from coming to school increased significantly on the day they were visited by a dog; children also showed a significant increase in concentration during classes on these days. The analysis of the results of Bergsen research carried out at the end of the eighties also shows that children who have to look after their dog in their class have a better opinion about themselves.

Monika Trofimov and Agnieszka Radko from the educational foundation "Pies i Staś" who for several years have been working with children who have some deficits in the emotional and social sphere mentioned above acknowledged positive changes among children who have regular contact with dogs, have a few more others observed in their work: children learn self-control, follow specific rules, be attentive and responsible for the other person and for the tasks they undertake.

## **Summary**

As evidenced by the examples cited above, dog therapy, or contact with the dog, brings positive benefits – it enables the child to develop motor, emotional and social development more quickly, thus supporting the child's development. Babies start crawling and walking more quickly, they become more open, they have better cognitive development and aroused curiosity, their speech ability is better, they are

usually not allergies, they have a stronger and more healthy immune system. They learn empathy, finding out that hurting animals hurts them just as well as people, that animals feel as well as humans, they can enjoy our presence and faithfully love us. Children learn that animals are not toys, but living and thinking beings that are need to be cared for. They learn compulsiveness by taking a dog for a walk, feeding or cleaning after them. Thanks to the dog's company, children do not feel lonely, have a real friend and confidant of their problems. The presence of a dog shapes the child about the world around him, the child quickly learns that both animals and people are part of nature and nature. Children learn the biology and life style of an animal on an ongoing basis at every stage of its development, they learn how old they can achieve, illness and death look like, thanks to which they learn to care for and help others, or to experience mourning. Having a dog also shows the child the consequences of such a choice, that it is a serious and responsible decision for his entire life, associated with numerous duties. Thanks to the presence of a dog, children with disabilities often forget about their limitations and dysfunctions. Dog activities build a sense of self-worth, self-confidence. Dog therapy teaches independence and responsibility for yourself and the dog.

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## Abstract

Already in primitive hunter-gatherer communities they were aware of the properties of the dog's influences, positively affecting the health and well-being of man. Over the centuries, few efforts have been made to use these animals for therapeutic purposes. Only in the second half of the twentieth century, classes with dogs gained recognition in the supporting the therapy process of somatic and mental diseases. In recent years, dogs have been used in alternative ways to support child development in Poland and around the world. One of them is dog therapy, also known as kynotherapy, or therapy with a dog participation. Observations of practitioners show that this method brings enormous benefits in the rehabilitation process and improves the functioning of children – supports their development.

**Key words:** dogotherapy, people with disabilities, developmental support, kynotherapy

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