Research on Animal Assisted Interventions for Youth At Risk: Theories, Best Evidence, and Challenges

The third session of the conference provided participants with the theoretical underpinnings of animal assisted programs as a youth violence prevention strategy, best evidence for animal assisted interventions in adolescent mental health, and a review of the major obstacles to evaluation of animal assisted programs.

Barbara Carr, Executive Director, SPCA of Erie County

Barbara S. Carr has worked in the animal welfare field for 20 years. She has served as the Executive Director of the Erie County SPCA since 1993. In addition to caring for companion animals through rescue, investigation, sheltering and adoptions, the ECSPCA cares for farm animals and has one of the largest wildlife rehabilitation centers in New York State. Ms. Carr has developed many outreach programs during her tenure at the ECSPCA, including award-winning humane education programs and curriculums for public and private schools.

According to Carr, preliminary research suggests a variety of potential outcomes for youth from participation in animal assisted programs such as decreasing depression and anxiety, reducing behavioral problems, improving emotional well-being, enhancing conflict management skills, increasing animal care knowledge, and facilitating social interaction. She asked panelists to address the following questions: What kinds of programs, types of participants, program ingredients, and which outcomes offer the “best shot” for demonstrating and documenting the effectiveness of animal assisted programs? In other words, what outcomes should be researched and what are the ideal program components to achieve these outcomes?

Theoretical Framework for Animal Assisted Interventions As Violence Prevention Strategy
Randall Lockwood, Ph.D., Senior Vice President for Anti-Cruelty Initiatives and Legislative Services, ASPCA

Randall Lockwood is Senior Vice President for Anti-Cruelty Initiatives and Legislative Services for the ASPCA. He received his Ph.D. in Psychology from Washington University in St. Louis. He frequently provides training on

The major points from Dr. Lockwood’s presentation are as follows:

- The balanced and restorative justice model includes accountability, community safety, competency development, offender responsibility, victim involvement, and community partnerships.

- We need to identify what competencies are missing from youth and what competencies can be addressed through animal assisted interventions in order to help specific populations of juveniles become useful members of society.

- Violent criminal behavior constitutes a choice. We need to get youth to anticipate consequences and make better choices.

- Animals are good at reading and communicating mood and intentions. Some populations of people lack these skills for experiential and psychological reasons. Animals can be role models to children of these behaviors.

- The roots of violence and animal cruelty include culture, personal and family history, and biological predisposition. The need for power and control, a history of abuse, neglect, or trauma, low emotional intelligence, and absence of empathy are some of the individual and family risk factors for violence and animal abuse. Biological predisposition is related to impulse control and arousal issues and emotional intelligence and social intelligence issues. Young males sometimes lack impulse control, which can be the result of low-functioning frontal lobes. Impulse control and arousal issues can have roots in the interaction of genetic, neurochemical, and environmental factors.

- The use of functional MRIs and PET scans are promising tools for looking at the impact of interventions.

- Effective interventions provide multi-sensory experiences and engage a range of senses and motor skills, involve social interaction with peers and counselors, take place in a safe and supportive environment, and associate appropriate behavior with positive outcomes.

Dr. Lockwood’s powerpoint presentation is in Appendix I.
Best Evidence for Animal Assisted Interventions in Adolescent Mental Health
Katherine A. Kruger, MSW, Assistant Director, Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society, Matthew J. Ryan Veterinary Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania

Katherine A. Kruger, MSW, Assistant Director of the Center for the Interaction of Animals & Society (CIAS) of the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, received her MSW from the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work in 2003. Prior to joining the CIAS, Ms. Kruger spent 11 years working in non-profit and research administration. Ms. Kruger also serves as Executive Secretary on the Board of the International Society for Anthrozoology (ISAZ).

The major points from Ms. Kruger's presentation are as follows:

- Many elements of sound research design (e.g. utilization of control or comparison groups, random assignment, well-defined, large and homogeneous samples, definition of specific outcomes and target behaviors, valid and reliable instruments to measure specified outcomes, minimization of bias, and use of appropriate statistical tests) have been missing from studies of animal assisted interventions.

- Animal assisted interventions have been applied to a range of mental health issues and diagnoses, including autism spectrum disorders, learning disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, conduct disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, affective disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, substance abuse, sexual abuse, suicidality, and dementia.

- Further empirical research is needed to investigate reports that animals may facilitate social interaction and build rapport, focus attention, have a calming effect, improve attendance, compliance and retention, provide social support and comfort, and are instruments of learning skills, cognitions, and behaviors.

- Funding for research is needed to make the field of animal assisted interventions attractive to university researchers. Since most studies have been carried out by students whose mentors are unfamiliar with the field or by health and mental health practitioners, research has been less rigorous.
• Researchers should look at non-specific effects of animal assisted interventions such as retention in treatment, rather than therapeutic change.

• The expert panel from CAIS Adolescent Mental Health Conference concluded evaluation of animal assisted interventions could be improved through augmentation to empirically supported treatments, comparison with other treatments, and prospective-longitudinal studies.

Ms. Kruger’s powerpoint presentation is in Appendix J.

Challenges in Evaluating Outcomes in Animal Assisted Interventions
Barbara Boat, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychiatry, University of Cincinnati

Barbara Walling Boat, Ph.D. is Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry, University of Cincinnati College of Medicine and Executive Director of The Childhood Trust at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. She has conducted research on the use of anatomical dolls in sexual abuse investigations and currently is interested in relationships among violence to children and animals and domestic violence, including dog bites. Her special clinical interests are treatment of dissociative disorders and the training and utilization of evidenced-based interventions in treating traumatized children.

The major points from Dr Boat’s presentation are as follows:

• Developed by Dr. Lynn Loar, Strategic Humane Intervention Program (SHIP) combines clicker training of homeless dogs with human interaction skills that focus on rewarding positive behavior. The YWCA of Greater Cincinnati, SPCA Cincinnati, and Childhood Trust collaborated to offer SHIP to battered mothers and children (2003-2004) and adolescents adjudicated for domestic violence and a caregiver (2005-2007).

• The goals for SHIP are lofty and include enhancing self-esteem, creating a more compassionate person, creating respect for the needs of animals and humans, enhancing empathy, and increasing child’s ability to delay gratification.

• Challenges in evaluation include: too lofty goals; complex outcome measures; lack of alignment between intervention and effective and available evaluation tools; developmental, cultural and stability issues that affect programmatic and follow-up potential; volunteer turnover; difficulties going to scale if program centered on individual program leaders; short length of intervention to impact behavior; and meeting expectations of multiple stakeholders.

• Solutions include post-retrospective instruments that ask participants about changes that they have experienced, what they have learned, and how they intend to use skills. Competencies gained in SHIP include knowing how to approach a strange dog, treating a dog after clicking behavior, giving a labeled praise when
someone does something you like, timing your click to mark the behavior you want to reward, being a trainer in the training game, and being patient when trying to teach someone a new skill. Preliminary SHIP data suggest that the effect of animal assisted programs on fear of animals could be an important outcome to measure. Standardized outcome measures are necessary for replication of programs.

- The impact of programs may be greater if they involve both the child and the caregiver.

Dr. Boat's powerpoint presentation is in Appendix K.

**Funding Evaluation of Animal Assisted Interventions**

Mary Lou Randour, Ph.D., Director, Human-Animal Relations, Education and Outreach, Human Society of the United States

Mary Lou Randour, Ph.D., a psychologist, is head of the Department of Human/Animal Relations - Education & Outreach for The Humane Society of the United States. Dr. Randour contributes to the professional literature, identifies legislative and policy opportunities in the area of the link between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence, and collaborates with various professional communities, including law enforcement, mental and public health, juvenile justice, child advocacy and domestic violence. Dr. Randour authored, *A Common Bond: Child Maltreatment and Animals in the Family*, a handbook developed in partnership with the American Bar Association, which is designed for all court officials.
working on child welfare concerns. She is first author of another handbook, AniCare Child, an approach that focuses on why and how to assess and treat children who abuse animals, and second author of The AniCare Model of Treatment for Animal Abuse, which focuses on the treatment of adults.

The major points from Dr. Randour's presentation are as follows:

- With evaluation, programs can reach a larger audience.

- We need to define what we are trying to achieve and what issues we are trying to enhance. The mode is animal assisted intervention.

- Resources for intervention programs and evaluations related to prevention of youth violence can be found within the Department of Justice (Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Institute of Justice, and Office of Justice Programs) and the Department of Health and Human Services (Center for Disease Control, Administration for Children and Families, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, NIH/NIMH, and Family Violence and Prevention Services).

- Partnerships between domestic violence programs and animal assisted programs could be effective.

- A National Technical Assistance Center on AAT and Youth Violence Prevention is needed to provide up-to-date information on programs, program evaluation instruments, grant proposals, technical assistance, publications and other resources and to facilitate communication.

Dr. Randour's powerpoint presentation is in Appendix L.