

EXPERT GROUP MEETING OVERVIEW

An expert group meeting was held on December 8, 2007, following the National Technology Assessment Workshop on Animal Assisted Programs for Youth At Risk. The expert group was comprised of a subset of researchers from the conference. The expert group included Dr. Andrew Rowan, Dr. Randy Lockwood, Dr. Barbara Boat, Dr. Aubrey Fine, Dr. Arnie Arluke, Dr. Mary Lou Randour, Dr. Christina Ridley-Curtiss, Dr. Martha-Elin Blomquist, Kathy Kruger, MSW, and Dr. Jennifer Jackman. Using the issues that Dr. Kazdin raised during his presentations as a starting point, the expert group discussed conference results and options for future directions in evaluation of animal assisted programs.

The main points from the Expert Group Meeting are as follows:

- Participants came away from the conference with a strong desire to get involved in evaluation. The conference was ground-breaking in terms of forging links between researchers and practitioners and moving the field forward.
- Participants had two different concerns: 1) program evaluation to improve outcomes and funding and 2) research to develop the field.
- Research on therapeutic change requires larger budgets. Animal assisted interventions are not ready to compete in the therapeutic realm. Small controlled, single-case experimental, qualitative, and laboratory study designs, as Dr. Kazdin suggests, are best initially to build the case for AAI.
- The effect of animal assisted interventions on quality of life for participants, staff, and animals is an important and viable research direction with hard endpoints that are easier to measure. Measures of staff quality of life could include staff turnover and morale. Reduced staff turnover and improved morale result in better care. Measures of participant quality of life could include retention and compliance with treatment. Even short-term improvements in quality of life can be beneficial.
- The strength of animal assisted programs is the connection between people and animals. Regardless of treatment objectives or outcomes, promoting good care of animals and respect for animals can create an important paradigm shift.
- “Founder effects” shape many of the current animal assisted programs. Few programs are in their second or third generation of leadership. Philosophies, evaluations, and procedures are not yet institutionalized. Research is needed to capture the ingredients that animate animal assisted programs in order to promote organizational development, sustainability, and replication. Replication is critical.
- Animal assisted reading programs are a possible research focus since these programs are more standardized and the literature shows that teaching skills can transform behavior. Reading programs also have a variety of well-established outcome measures. Concrete measures include how many books are taken out

of the library, grades, and homework. Care would need to be taken to start with equal reading levels and interest among the children and to standardize training of volunteers to be efficient reading coaches. A controlled study could be done comparing the traditional reading program model, college student instructors with dogs, and dogs alone.

- Training parenting behavior is another promising research direction. However, research would need to show lasting and generalizable effects beyond the program since many years might intervene between program participation and parenthood.
- At-risk is a problematic label. Programs need to define precisely for what participants are “at risk.”
- An accumulation of case studies also will help build the case for animal assisted interventions. Case studies should be rigorous in which independent therapists review clinical records to document responses to prior treatments and the effects of participation in animal assisted programs. Searches for existing case studies should be conducted, including calls through APA for submission of case studies. Confidentiality is an important consideration. An online course could be developed to teach the case study method.
- Data on outcomes for shelter dogs should be collected by programs.
- The Healthy Start study offers a model of a multi-site study with a variety of programs. Differences among programs were documented. The study used matched pairs as a control.
- A National Technical Assistance Center for Animal Assisted Interventions would be a powerful resource for both researchers and practitioners. The Center could be the repository for published and unpublished research, conference proceedings, and instrumentation. Possible models include the NIH Center for Alternative Medicine, Center for Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado, Hamilton Fish Institute, the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, and the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center. A Center could be established by Congressional act with federal funding.
- Research has shown that bringing together a group of youth with behavioral problems creates the danger of contagion and reinforcement of negative behavior. In groups, the balance of youth with and without behavioral problems is critical. Theoretically, in animal assisted dog training programs, dogs could be the equivalent of the “good people” and a positive force. The human dog handlers also contribute positively to the group dynamic.
- With a small amount of funding, RFPs can be generated and grants disseminated for research collaborations between animal assisted programs and university-

based researchers. A first stage could support graduate students to work with programs.

- One of the next steps could be to submit a R18 request for funding to support a series of conferences to develop the field to take us to the next step. At the conferences, practitioners and researchers would work together to formulate research directions and strategies.
- Additional research is needed on whether the “magic” of programs is transferable or is tied to individuals who run the programs. Research is needed to capture the ingredients that animate animal assisted programs in order to promote organizational development, sustainability, and replication.



