

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Evaluating Animal-Assisted Therapy in Group Treatment for Child Sexual Abuse

Dietz, T. J., Davis, D., & Pennings, J. (2012). Evaluating animal-assisted therapy in group treatment for child sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 21 (6), 665-683. doi:10.1080/10538712.2012.726700

SUMMARY: Child sexual abuse can have a myriad of lasting negative effects, and there is a need for multiple effective treatments. The effectiveness of using therapy dogs and stories in treatment for youth with a history of sexual abuse to reduce trauma symptoms, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, anger, posttraumatic stress disorder, dissociation, and sexual concerns was examined. Results suggest that incorporating both dogs and stories into youth treatment for child sexual abuse may be beneficial.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Youth who received treatment with dogs and stories had significantly reduced trauma symptoms in all areas post-treatment.
- For all symptoms except sexual concerns, youth in the dogs and stories treatment had greater symptom improvement than youth in the dogs-only treatment, who in turn had greater symptom improvement than youth in the treatment without dogs.
- Youth in the dogs and stories group had lower post-treatment symptoms than youth in the group without dogs, even after controlling for baseline and demographic characteristics.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Collaborate with existing military programs to increase awareness of child sexual abuse and available treatments for military youth
- Help develop online resources and educational modules for military parents regarding how to talk to youth about sexual abuse and getting treatment

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate parents about available treatment centers that incorporate therapy dogs and stories into treatment for child sexual abuse
- Disseminate information to both military parents and youth regarding background information on child sexual abuse and possible signs and symptoms of youth affected by sexual abuse

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that treatment resources presented to military families for child sexual abuse include programs incorporating therapy dogs and stories whenever available
- Encourage education for all providers working with military families about child sexual abuse and treatment

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METHODS

- Youth ages 7-17 years who had a history of sexual abuse and were referred for participation in trauma treatment at one of three child advocacy centers in a Southern U.S. city were recruited.
- Youth were assigned to one of three treatment groups, which included usual trauma treatment, treatment augmented by therapy dogs, and treatment augmented by therapy dogs and stories.
- Youth-reported trauma symptoms were compared before and after each of the three treatments.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 153 youth (94% female) with a mean age of 11.39 years and a history of sexual abuse.
- Participants attended treatment with no dogs (21%), dogs-only (39%), or dogs and stories (40%).
- Youth identified as Latino (43%), White (37%), Black (16%), Native American (1%), or another race (3%).
- A minority of youth had experienced multiple incidents of abuse (22%).

LIMITATIONS

- Youth were not randomly assigned to treatment groups, and youth in the stories and dogs treatment group had higher rates of multiple abuse incidents and higher baseline trauma symptoms, preventing firm conclusions regarding what factors caused symptom improvement.
- A no-treatment control group was not included, and symptoms may have naturally decreased across time.
- Groups were completed consecutively, starting with no dogs and ending with dogs and stories, and changes across groups (e.g., therapist skills, resources) may have impacted results.
- The same therapists completed the pre- and post-assessments of symptoms for all three types of groups, potentially introducing researcher bias that may have impacted results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct a randomized controlled trial treatment trial with random assignment to simultaneous groups and a no-treatment control group in order to better assess the effects of incorporating dogs and stories
- Examine other factors that may impact these treatments (e.g., traits of the dog, handler, and therapist)
- Investigate gender effects, including comfort with mixed-gender groups, in youth treatment

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