The Effects of Pet Therapy on Pediatric Patients with Autism

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Abstract

Objective: To identify the effects of pet therapy and improvement of social development in ASD Level 2 children.

Design: Quantitative; Quasi-experimental; Descriptive

Setting: Western, rural Kansas Pediatric Center

Participants: Children ages 5-10 years old diagnosed with ASD Level 2. Nurses, Parents of the children, Occupational therapists

Methods: Children with Level 2 Autism will be separated in two groups: one group will receive pet therapy and one group will not receive pet therapy. The children will be brought into the Pediatric Center every two weeks to be assessed and the parents will complete the Childhood Autism Rating Scale.

Results/Conclusion: pending results and data collection

Introduction

Pediatric patients with autism tend to shy away from social events and interactions with other people. The autistic pediatric patients tend to project personal feelings towards people or situations by expressing problem behaviors (Siewertsen, French, & Teramoto, 2020). Autism is explained as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) with three levels of diagnosis. This study focuses on Level 2 autism which is characterized by requiring more support with communication both verbally and nonverbally, as well as exhibiting behavior issues and outbursts. Research shows multiple interventions to address ASD Level 2, one being pet therapy. O’Haire (2012) explains that pet therapy consists of horseback riding and building a human‐dog relationship throughout the therapeutic timeframe of six weeks. The usage of pet therapy could improve their social development and interaction with other people and peers. According to Berry, A., et al. (2020), pet therapy can also decrease problem behaviors and outbursts.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine if pet therapy increases social development in autistic children up to 10 years old.

Key Terms

Pet therapy: Interactions involving dogs and horseback riding 30 minutes a day three times a week for six weeks. (O’Haire, 2012).

Autism Pediatric Patients: Children ages 5-10 years old diagnosed with ASD Level 2 (Holland, 2018).

Social Development: Includes person-to-person interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, and behavioral outbursts (Anderson, S., & Meints, K., 2016).

Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the Human Animal Interaction theory from Kruger & Serpell (2010). This theory explains how animals can provide a supportive and reliable relationship. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder struggle with communicating feelings. Animal assisted therapy allows children to effectively communicate their feelings and emotions in a more therapeutic way. The animal assisted therapy provides an entrusting and comfortable atmosphere and relationship for the child.

Methodology

Research Design: Quantitative; Quasi-experimental; Descriptive

Intervention

Parents with ASD Level 2 children will be presented with the idea of starting pet therapy for 6 weeks for their children. After consent is obtained from the parents, the nurse will perform a baseline autism assessment to confirm the severity of the autism. 50 children will go into the Pediatric Center every 2 weeks for an assessment and the parents will complete the Childhood Autism Rating Scale questionnaire.

Independent Variable: Pet therapy

Dependent Variable: Social development

Proposed Research Question

Does pet therapy in ASD Level 2 pediatric patients improve social development?

Literature Sources


Sample

Children ages 5-10 years old diagnosed with ASD Level 2 in a western, rural Kansas Pediatric Center.

Ethical Considerations

Seeking IRB Full Review at Fort Hays State University, the Nursing Department, and Hays Medical Center.

Data Collection

N=100

n=50 children 5-10 years old with Level 2 ASD that will receive pet therapy for 6 weeks.

n=50 children 5-10 years old with Level 2 ASD that will not receive pet therapy.

100 children with ASD Level 2 will be enrolled in the study from western, rural Kansas Pediatric Centers. A written consent will be obtained from the parents to ensure confidentiality. All 100 children will be assessed for a baseline autism assessment and the parents will complete the Childhood Autism Rating Scale questionnaire. The children will be randomly divided up in two groups. One group will receive pet therapy for 6 weeks and the other group will not receive pet therapy. Every 2 weeks, the parents will complete the Childhood Autism Rating Scale questionnaire and the 100 children will be evaluated on improvement of social development based on the scale shown below. The results from each appointment will be compared to the baseline results to show improvement.

Results/Findings

Projected Data Analysis Method

An Independent T-test will be used to compare the social development using the Childhood Autism Rating Scale questionnaire associated with both who will be using pet therapy and those who will not be using pet therapy.

Literature Findings

In the study by Berry, (2020), and colleagues found that the use of therapy dogs resulted in beneficial effects on the children’s behaviors and also on the welfare of the family. The reports showed that the ability of dogs to act as social catalysts, improve social interaction between people and enhancing social networks, especially for those with severe disabilities and who suffer with social discrimination. According to Siewertsen and Teramoto, (2020), the study found that a significant improvement in the children’s gross motor functions occurred, both on the simulator and in other aspects of life. The results also showed large improvements in the children’s expression of emotions and behavior.

Discussion

Implications For Nursing

If the usage of Pet Therapy in ASD Level 2 pediatric patients improve social development. Information regarding the details of pet therapy could be taught or instructed with the diagnosis of autism. The nurses that are assessing the child during the therapy will be taught about how to interact with the child in a trusting environment. The assessment process will involve assessing communication and social development of the child. The nurses will also observe each therapy session to ensure safety of the child and effectiveness of the therapy.

Conclusion

Pending results and data collection. The study anticipates that pet therapy will improve social development in children with ASD Level 2. In future research, it is recommended that this study be conducted on a larger scale in more diverse so these findings can be applied to a greater population.

References


