

Study finds therapy dogs effective in reducing symptoms of ADHD

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New study led by UCI's Sabrina E. B. Schuck, PhD, MA, executive director of the UCI Child Development Center and assistant professor in residence in the Department of Pediatrics at UCI School of Medicine, finds therapy dogs to be effective in reducing the symptoms of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children. Credit: University of California, Irvine

In a first of its kind randomized trial, researchers from the UCI School of Medicine found therapy dogs to be effective in reducing the symptoms of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children. The study's main outcomes were recently published by the American Psychological Association in the Society of Counseling Psychology's *Human-Animal Interaction Bulletin (HAIB)*. Additional new findings were presented at the International Society for Anthrozoology 2018 Conference held July 2-5 in Sydney, Australia.

Titled, "A Randomized Controlled Trial of Traditional Psychosocial and Canine-Assisted Interventions for Children with ADHD," the research involved [children](#) aged 7 to 9 who had been diagnosed with ADHD and who had never taken medicines for their condition. The study randomized participants to compare benefits from evidenced-based, "best practice" psychosocial interventions with the same [intervention](#) augmented by the assistance of certified [therapy](#) dogs. The research was led by Sabrina E. B. Schuck, Ph.D., MA, executive director of the UCI Child Development Center and assistant professor in residence in the Department of Pediatrics at UCI School of Medicine.

Results from Schuck's research indicate children with ADHD who received canine assisted intervention (CAI) experienced a reduction in inattention and an improvement in [social skills](#). And, while both CAI and non-CAI interventions were ultimately found to be effective for reducing overall ADHD symptom severity after 12 weeks, the group assisted by therapy dogs fared significantly better with improved attention and social skills at only eight weeks and demonstrated fewer behavioral problems. No significant group differences, however, were reported for hyperactivity and impulsivity.

"Our finding that dogs can hasten the treatment response is very meaningful," said Schuck. "In addition, the fact that parents of the children who were in the CAI group reported significantly fewer problem behaviors over time than those treated without therapy dogs is further evidence of the importance of this research."

Guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics for the management of ADHD underscore the importance of both psychopharmacological and psychosocial therapies. Patients who receive psychosocial therapy prior to medications have shown to fare better. Additionally, many families prefer not to use medications in young children.

"The take away from this is that families now have a viable option when seeking alternative or adjunct therapies to medication treatments for ADHD, especially when it comes to impaired attention," said Schuck. "Inattention is perhaps the most salient problem experienced across the life span for individuals with this disorder."

This study is the first known [randomized controlled trial](#) of CAI for children with ADHD. It illustrates that the presence of [therapy dogs](#) enhances traditional psychosocial intervention and is feasible and safe to implement.

Animal assisted intervention (AAI) has been used for decades, however, only recently has empirical evidence begun to support these practices reporting benefits including reduced stress, improved cognitive function, reduced problem behaviors and improved attention.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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