

Therapy dogs for children with speech difficulties shows promising results

September 19 2018



Mgr. Iva Bajtlerová conducting a speech and language therapy session with 5-year old Andrea, assisted by Agáta the dog. Credit: Josef Ruzicka.

Therapy assisted by a dog could be more effective than standard speech and language therapy for children with communication impairments, suggests a new study published in the journal *Anthrozoös*.

The study found children with the condition developmental dysphasia, which affects the ability to communicate and form words, were more likely to be able to mimic communicative signals in a therapy session where a dog was present.

Researchers observed that the children in the group with the therapy dog also seemed more motivated and open to communicating. Additionally, the children displayed authentic, natural expressions during their interactions with the dog.

Lead author Kristýna Machová from Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague commented, "The presence of the dog improves the relationship with the therapist, as it distracts from the fear of therapy in children and provides them with a form of support during the practice."

In this study, researchers at Czech University conducted the first long-term randomized study of its kind, with a control and an experimental group, involving 69 nursery-school [children](#) (52 male and 17 female) participants diagnosed with developmental dysphasia. The aim was to understand if undergoing speech therapy accompanied by a dog improved results.

For both groups, the initial examination of each child involved evaluating their skills at baseline, with a follow-up scheduled for 10 months later. The control group received traditional speech therapy, while the experimental group had animal assistance therapy sessions with a female middle-aged Peruvian hairless dog named Agáta.

Despite the promising findings from this study, as this is the first of its

kind and there were improvements found in both groups, the authors have stated that further research would be needed to consolidate the findings—especially those involving a larger group of participants.

However, they do agree that there is great potential in the approach to complement and aid the current conventional approach, as canine-assisted [therapy](#) has been found to be more effective than more standard forms of delivery in many other disciplines.

Developmental dysphasia, or specific [speech](#) impairment, is a common disorder whereby sufferers struggle to formulate words verbally and rank significantly below their non-verbal intellectual level. It is widely thought that the ability to improve communication skills in sufferers would also help to improve quality of life which strongly supports funding more research into this area.

More information: Canine-assisted Speech Therapy for Children with Communication Impairments: A Randomized Controlled Trial, [DOI: 10.1080/08927936.2018.1505339](#)

Provided by Taylor & Francis

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