Animal Assisted Play Therapy  
Philosophy and Guiding Principles  

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For this document, the term "animals" will be used to refer to nonhuman animals.  

Whenever nonhuman animals are asked to perform tasks under human direction, their welfare needs to be considered. Too many therapy animals are exposed to debilitating levels of emotional stress or exhaustion without any recognition by their owners, a state of affairs that disregards the animal's welfare and presents a very poor model of caring to children. Similarly, when therapists bring dogs into the playroom or take children out to work with horses, they must think about additional factors that impact the child and the therapeutic process. To ensure the physical and emotional well-being of children and animals as well as the therapy itself, the following principles have been developed (VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2010).  

**Respect.** To the greatest degree possible, AAPT ensures the equal and reciprocal respect of children and animals. The needs of humans and nonhuman animals are considered equally important.  

**Safety.** AAPT activities must be physically and emotionally safe for all involved. The therapist places a limit upon, or stops immediately, any activity that is not safe. The therapist is responsible for maintaining the safety of all participants in the session.  

**Enjoyment.** AAPT sessions must be enjoyable and pleasant for the animal co-therapist as well as the child client. Children or therapy animals have the option of nonparticipation; i.e., they may opt out of any activities they wish. Tired or bored dogs can lie down. Children can choose to play without the dog. Child and animal decisions are respected within the boundaries of safety. The therapist facilitates the session to ensure its therapeutic value regardless of these choices.  

**Acceptance.** In AAPT, the therapist accepts the child and the animal for who they are. The therapist accepts and works with the child's needs, feelings, and process without pushing them in a different direction or at a faster pace. Similarly, the therapist does not expect the animal to become something he or she is not. For example, AAPT dogs are not expected to become so docile or controlled that their individual personalities and interests are denied. While therapists need to train their dogs for good behavior and ability to tolerate children and the many activities of the playroom, they do not overtrain them to relinquish their essential canine and individual natures. Some dogs are more suited to nondirective play therapy while others are better candidates for directive play therapy approaches, and therapists consider this and act accordingly. The same principle of acceptance also applies to other species involved in play therapy.  

**Training.** Therapists train their therapy animals using positive reward-, play-, and relationship-based methods. Aversive equipment or procedures, such as the use of whips; choke, prong, and shock collars; or physical corrections of the animal, have no place in the training, the
therapy sessions, or the lives of these animals. This principle serves the welfare of both animal and child.

**Relationship.** The AAPT process focuses on relationship, not control. Just as the animals are taught to behave politely and respectfully with children, children learn to treat the animals with tolerance and respect. The therapist helps children learn to recognize and respond to the animal's feelings while developing a healthy relationship with the animal. All interactions with the animal co-therapist follow the same principles for the development of humane, empathic, healthy human relationships. The essential playful nature of interactions during AAPT permit this to happen readily.

**Process.** AAPT is a process-oriented form of therapy. While sessions might focus on specific tasks or goals, such as teaching something new to the dog or horse or other animal, the process of getting there is considered of much greater importance than achieving any single outcome. The therapist knows how to facilitate and use the process to help children overcome their difficulties or develop new skills. Unexpected events are woven into the texture of the session so that child and animal needs are met.

**Foundations.** AAPT is grounded in well-established theories and practices in terms of child development, child clinical intervention, play therapy, and humane animal treatment. Adherence to these foundations and the other AAPT principles is designed to ensure a positive, relationship-oriented, best-practices approach to each child and each animal involved in the therapeutic process.

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