

Few things have blossomed as quickly as animal-assisted interventions (AAI) have during the past several years. Many people proudly talk of the wonderful work their “therapy dogs” are doing. Indeed, the benefits of AAI for people of all ages and in many circumstances are remarkable. As with many popular ideas, there’s a downside to this rapid growth, however. As people eagerly offer their companion animals to assist other human beings with physical or emotional difficulties, they sometimes unintentionally place their animals in untenable situations. One need not look far to see photographs and videos of dogs sitting stiffly on beds with heads turned away, horses standing for long periods while their sides are painted as if they were an artist’s canvas, dogs with whale eye being squeezed around the neck by children, or other scenes depicting animal stress while the humans around them are smiling proudly.

Greater awareness of how AAI experiences impact nonhuman animals is needed. While there is little doubt that AAI volunteers, as well as professionals such as physical, occupational, mental health, or other therapists love their animals and intend them no harm, it seems that there is sometimes a gap between their intentions and their actions. If we asked most people if they believed they were treating their animals “humanely” during AAI, it is likely that the resounding answer would be, “Of course!” Unfortunately, enthusiasm for AAI and the potential benefits it brings to human clients has great potential to cloud practitioners’ ability to see what is happening for the nonhuman animal conscripted into service. Multidisciplinary dialogue about what it means to be “humane” in AAI is needed.

There are a number of ways that canine professionals can engage with AAI practitioners to contribute to the humane treatment of the dogs and other animals involved. These are outlined below.

### Selection, Socialization, and Training

Many volunteers and therapists who engage in AAI are dog owners, not trainers. They love their dogs and would not wish to harm them. Even so, they may lack the in-depth knowledge needed to ensure humane treatment. A life with dogs does not guarantee that people have acquired the knowledge and skills needed. Canine professionals can, and often do, provide the valuable services of helping owners with the selection of puppies or rehomed dogs, guiding the socialization process to ensure that the dog is comfortable in the planned therapeutic environment, and training the dog to have appropriate behaviors for this work.

When canine professionals collaborate with practitioners of AAI, it is important that preconceived notions of what makes a “good therapy dog” are set aside. Dogs are involved in many different types of therapies (Fine, 2010; Winkle, 2013; VanFleet, 2008), which make use of different temperaments and behaviors. Some settings, such as hospitals, require quiet, gentle, well-behaved dogs, while AAI during play therapy or physical therapy might be assisted by dogs who are more active, playful, and energetic. Before steps are taken to select, socialize, and train a potential therapy dog, it is vital that the AAI practitioner and the canine professional discuss the therapeutic environment and the canine temperament and behaviors needed to do the work. One size does not fit all when it comes to current-day AAI.

## What It Means to Be Humane in Animal-Assisted Interventions



Risë VanFleet, PhD, RPT-S, CDBC

## Methods, Modeling, and Metaphors

The methods used in training and interacting with AAI dogs matter. It is critical that AAI practitioners engage the services of canine professionals who use dog-friendly, non-coercive, positive, and relationship-focused training methods. This humane foundation provides the framework for all interactions between dog and AAI handler, but also between dog and the therapy clients being served. Pulling and jerking on the leash or using harsh tones to scold the dog for “wrongdoing” creates physical and emotional stress for dogs, leads to potential problem behaviors in the dogs, and provides a counter-therapeutic tone to any visits or therapy sessions. Training attitudes and methods contribute mightily to the relationship between AAI practitioner and dog. Training, in essence, provides the template for interactions that happen at home as well as when “on the job.” AAI practitioners need to establish good habits of positive interaction with their dogs in order to build their relationship and establish strong patterns that will carry over into complex therapeutic environments. How they train shows on their visits.

With every visit, AAI practitioners demonstrate relationships. With every interaction with their canine therapy partners, they provide a model for clients, and it is key that this model is one of kindness and respect. Imagine working to develop empathy in a child who has a history of injuring animals while tugging the neck of the dog or pulling the dog sternly into a desired position! Providing positive role models of interactions with animals is an essential feature of any form of therapeutic visit or session. Consider, too, that the relationship between the AAI handler and the dog serves as a metaphor for the therapeutic relationship between the visitor or therapist and the client being served. If clients observe the handler treating the dog harshly, or ignoring obvious signs of distress in the animal, it conveys that the AAI practitioner may not be trustworthy with human relationships either. Even relatively minor negative handling practices erode the entire therapeutic process. For the sake of the dogs, as well as of the clients being involved in the AAI process, it is important that practitioners and the canine professionals with whom they work focus on positive, relationship-building methods at all times.

## Equipment

Related to the concept of establishing a respectful and kind relationship every step along the way is the subject of equipment. Reputable AAI programs typically prohibit the use of force-based equipment such as choke chains, prong collars, and shock- or e-collars. The well-prepared dog simply does not need them. Furthermore, such equipment has no place in the training of AAI dogs. These items run a large risk of causing discomfort, or even pain, to dogs, and the thinking behind their use often arises from a human need for control rather than a focus on building a mutually respectful relationship.

While AAI dogs need to be well behaved and under handler control, equipment that causes discomfort (or similar hand-delivered ear pinches) is not necessary in their training, nor during their work. Many positive training alternatives exist that do not risk stressing the dogs or creating behavioral fallout. Equipment represents management, for the most part, rather than training or relationship. Positive training approaches that teach dogs the desired behaviors are generally considered the humane option for dogs involved in therapy work, and equipment typically consists of a flat collar and loose leash. Ultimately, the sign of a well-prepared therapy dog is the absence of the need for any equipment and the presence of a relaxed dog eager to interact with the handler and the clients being served. Many AAI programs require that dogs are on leash when working (although some do not), but the mark of an admirable therapy team is one that features nonphysical and pleasant communication of cues and behaviors.

## Body Language

As most canine professionals know, a working knowledge of dog body language provides real-time feedback about how the dog is responding in any given situation. Indeed, it is the body language that informs us whether an animal is stressed or content while involved in AAI. It is likely that AAI practitioners become more responsive to their canine partners if they develop “fluency” in canine communication. There are excellent resources available to AAI practitioners who want to build their canine vocabulary and understanding of body language (Byrnes, 2008; Hill, 2011; Kalnajs, 2007; Tirrell, 2014; and VanFleet, 2013). Trainers and behavior consultants can help those involved in AAI develop the skills to (a) recognize the whole-body signals their dogs are displaying, (b) interpret those signals accurately in context, and (c) take appropriate action to reduce the stress levels of their dogs. This action might include ending a session or even removing the dog from AAI service.

## Goodness of Fit

“Goodness of fit” is a psychology concept that is applicable to AAI work (VanFleet, 2006). As used in child development studies, goodness of fit refers to how well children’s temperament or personality features mesh with the environmental demands placed upon them (such as in their families or at school). When there is congruence between the individual child and the environmental demands, there is growth. When there is a mismatch between demands and the individual’s temperament, there are problems. This basic concept can easily be used when thinking about animal welfare and quality of AAI programming. For example, one would not want a high-energy, easily aroused, sound-sensitive dog visiting bed-ridden patients in a hospital. The mismatch of the needs of the environment with this type of canine personality would likely lead to nuisance behaviors at best and

*Continued on next page*

chaos at worst. The dog would be required to remain uncharacteristically docile for long periods of time, and the visits would be distinguished by efforts to control the dog rather than attending to the human client.

As the AAI field grows and diversifies, more varied roles for dogs and other animals are being defined. Different roles require different types of personalities and interests on the part of the animals being involved. The common therapy dog assessments do not differentiate at this level, but canine professionals who run therapy dog programs or who work with AAI practitioners and their dogs can assist with the process of ensuring goodness of fit between individual dogs and the AAI programs in which they work. It is perhaps a bit like matching the talents and interests of job applicants with the job descriptions for which they are being considered.

Presumably, if dog trainers can help AAI practitioners find the right matches for their dogs' personalities and interests, the dogs would enjoy their AAI involvement more and experience less stress. An energetic, highly sociable, playful dog might work better in play therapy with children while a quiet, relaxed, lap dog might enjoy and do well on visits to a hospice. Of course, there are numerous factors to be considered in determining goodness of fit, requiring full collaboration between AAI practitioners and the dog trainers who are helping them.

To implement an AAI program based on goodness of fit, one would need to identify assessments for which validity and reliability can be established and that evaluate the features needed for AAI options (e.g., Clothier, 2007; Serpell, 2014; VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2013). In the meantime, even informal canine assessments that go beyond the basic behavior testing of many therapy programs could be implemented. From there, careful consideration of the environmental demands of the various AAI "jobs" would be matched with individual dogs' personalities. Then, if practitioners were fully prepared to watch their dogs at all times during AAI, they could take appropriate steps to ensure the dogs' well-being, and consequently, the quality of the AAI service they are providing. The certification program for Animal-Assisted Play Therapy has included many of these features to ensure humane treatment of animals during the delivery of AAI ([www.internationalinstituteforaapt.org](http://www.internationalinstituteforaapt.org)), including an Individual Therapy Involvement Plan for each animal involved.

## Conclusion

The potential of AAI to benefit people struggling with medical, physical, developmental, and mental health challenges is enormous. Even so, practitioners need to ensure the humane treatment of the animals involved, not only for the sake of the animals themselves, but also for the welfare of the human clients being served. Not all dogs are well suited to AAI, and among those who are, it is important to ensure that they truly enjoy being involved as much as their human partners do. Canine professionals have a great deal to offer such programs

and their human and canine practitioners, and new roles are emerging. Collaborations between AAI practitioners and canine professionals seem a natural and important outgrowth of the rapidly expanding demand for AAI.

## References

- Byrnes, C. (2008). *What is my dog saying? Canine communication 101*. [CD]. Spokane, Wash.: Diamonds in the Ruff.
- Clothier, S. (2007). *Clothier Animal Response Assessment Tool (CARAT)*. <http://www.suzanneclothier.com/content/carat>
- Fine, A.H., (Ed.). (2010). *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice* (3rd. ed.). New York, N.Y.: Elsevier.
- Hill, D. (2011). *Observation skills for training dogs*. [Facebook group]. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/observationskillsdogs/>
- Kalnajs, S. (2007). *The language of dogs*. [DVD]. Madison, Wis.: Blue Dog Training & Behavior.
- Serpell, J. (2014). *C-BARQ: Canine Behavioral Assessment & Research Questionnaire*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Penn Veterinary Medicine. <http://vetapps.vet.upenn.edu/cbarq/>
- Tirrell, P. (2014). *Dog signals: Better teamwork with therapy dogs, working dogs, and companion dogs*. Durham, N.C.: P. Tirrell.
- VanFleet, R. (2006). *Animal assisted play therapy: Professional training manual*. Boiling Springs, Pa.: Play Therapy Press.
- VanFleet, R. (2008). *Play therapy with kids & canines: Benefits for children's developmental and psychosocial health*. Sarasota, Fla.: Professional Resource Press.
- VanFleet, R. (2013). *Canine communication in animal assisted play therapy: Recognizing, understanding, and responding to body language in our canine therapy partners*. [Online course]. Boiling Springs, Pa.: International Institute for AAPT Studies.
- VanFleet, R., & Faa-Thompson, T. (2013). *Animal Appropriateness Scale (AAS)*. Boiling Springs, Pa.: International Institute for AAPT Studies.
- Winkle, M. (2013). *Professional applications of animal assisted interventions: Blue dog book* (2nd ed.). Albuquerque, N.M.: Dogwood Therapy Services.
- Risë VanFleet, PhD, RPT-S, CDBC, is a child/family psychologist, certified dog behavior consultant, and founder of the Playful Pooch Program in Boiling Springs, Pa. She is the author of dozens of books and articles in the play therapy field. Her book, **Play Therapy with Kids & Canines**, won the Planet Dog Foundation's Sit. Speak. Act. Award for best book on service and therapy dogs in the 2008 DWAA competition. She also received 2009 and 2011 DWAA Maxwell Awards for best magazine series related to dogs and best training article in any magazine, respectively, for articles that appeared in the APDT Chronicle of the Dog. In 2013, she received the DWAA Friends of Rescue Special Award for her article, **The Empathic Dog Trainer**, which also appeared in the COTD. Her book, **The Human Half of Dog Training**, was nominated as a finalist for best of all training books in 2013 as well. She has received national recognition for her training seminars, including a recent honor from the Pennsylvania Psychological Association, The Distinguished Contributions to the Science and Profession of Psychology Award. She conducts seminars on animal-assisted play therapy, the human half of dog training, and working with highly fearful and traumatized dogs; offers several dog-related online courses; trains play therapy dogs, and consults about behavior problems. She can be reached through [www.risevanfleet.com](http://www.risevanfleet.com).

