



Zorgbeest

Guidelines for therapy dogs in care environments with a focus on animal welfare

“The field of Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) lacks formal universal guidelines on the ethics of human-animal relationships (Antonites & Odendaal, 2004). It is presumed that most HAI organizations emphasize that animal welfare be protected and enhanced where possible (Preziosi, 1997; Santori, 2011). However, it is understood that specific guidelines are difficult to formulate because research has not identified the precise criteria necessary to guarantee welfare. Consequently, AAA (Animal Assisted Activities) and AAT (Animal Assisted Therapy) organizations each set their own guidelines and regulations, making standardization of the field difficult.”

Applying guidelines for Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) in practice is not always easy. Various factors, such as the financial aspect, internal regulations, support from management, staff motivation, the existing infrastructure, the type of patients, the animals' health, etc. can make following the guidelines difficult. With these guidelines, we hope to create a basis for starting a project that comes as close to the ideal situation as possible. Once the project is up and running, the guidelines can be used as a support for ongoing evaluation and determining where, if necessary, modifications must be made. Each project is unique and “the perfect AAI project” does not yet exist. The goal is to strive for the best possible circumstances in your specific care environment.

Starting up an AAI project on your own is impossible. Various actors must be invited to a meeting to review these guidelines. According to experience, education, interest and the role each would like to play, the guidelines will be progressively allocated (as far as possible). For this reason, the guidelines have been categorised per subject:

1. Selection of the dog
2. Medical screening and behaviour monitoring of the dog
3. Competences of the involved actors
4. Training the dog
5. Human-dog interaction
6. Hygiene
7. Therapy room and design
8. Insurance & responsibilities
9. Information distribution
10. AAI & AAT sessions
11. Stress
12. Safety
13. Contraindications for the implementation of an AAI programme
14. Caring for the dog if the owner is hospitalised



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For the sake of the dog's welfare, it is not recommended that the dog live in the care facility on a permanent basis. These guidelines have therefore been drawn up for dogs visiting the facility or that are semi-residential (present in the care environment during daytime hours several days per week).

During the AAI sessions, the dog and his or her handler can be accompanied by a therapist if the approach is therapeutic (AAT). The dog handler and the therapist can also be the same person. If the sessions are more of an informal nature, only the dog and handler are present (AAA).

Semi-residential dogs are present in the facility for longer periods, e.g. several days per week, and their role is mainly that of a pet. This means the dog's main handler cannot always accompany the dog and another handler can take on this role. In addition, they can also be used in specific AAA and AAT sessions. Bear in mind that these sessions are more intensive for the dog than his or her role as a pet. Make sure the dog has sufficient time to relax/play, even if he or she remains in the facility.

When the dog handler visits with the patient's own dog, the handler is responsible for the dog.

All guidelines are formulated so that they are applicable for both Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) and Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) in diverse care environments. After several categories, a number of additional guidelines follow for specific situations:

- AAI in hospitals;
- AAT;
- Visits with the patient's own dog.

The more all of those involved are taken into account, the better the chance that both the people and the animals will benefit, and the more sustainable the project will be.

GOOD LUCK!