

The Effect of Animal-Assisted Therapy on Stress Responses in Hospitalized Children

Authors: Tsai, Chia-Chun; Friedmann, Erika; Thomas, Sue A.

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Abstract:

Hospitalization is a major, stressful experience for children. The stress associated with children's hospitalization may lead to negative physiological and psychological sequelae. Pediatric healthcare professionals can develop interventions to decrease children's stress during hospitalization. Although Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) frequently is used to alleviate the stress of hospitalization, little scientific evidence exists on its efficacy in that situation. This study examined the effects of AAT on cardiovascular responses, state anxiety, and medical fear in hospitalized children. A quasi-experimental, repeated measures design was used. Children (8 girls, 7 boys, aged 7 to 17 years) participated in AAT and comparison visits on two consecutive days; they were assigned to AAT ($n = 9$) or comparison ($n = 6$) visits first. Children's systolic blood pressure (SBP), diastolic blood pressure (DBP), and heart rate (HR) were measured 18 times: 3 pre-, during, and post-visit measurements each. State anxiety and medical fear were measured after each visit. Repeated measures ANOVAs were used for data analysis. SBP decreased from before to during to after AAT, while SBP decreased from before to during the comparison visit and increased from during to after the comparison intervention. The decreases in SBP after AAT continued after the intervention was over. The findings suggest that the cardiovascular effect of AAT may continue for at least a few minutes after the AAT ends. Children's anxiety and medical fear did not differ after the AAT visit compared with the comparison intervention. This exploratory study indicates that AAT can decrease physiological arousal in hospitalized children and therefore may be useful in helping them cope better in a hospital setting.

Keywords: [ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY](#); [BLOOD PRESSURE](#); [CHILDREN](#); [STRESS](#)

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