

Dogs, Cats and Horses: Their Different Representations in the Minds of Typical and Clinical Populations of Children

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Abstract:

Programs using dogs, cats, and horses as adjuncts in educational or therapeutic activities for children are well documented, even if little is known about the distinction made by children with regard to specific animals. This study explores children's thoughts about these three different animals. Three populations of children (84 typical children with no disabilities, 92 children with cognitive impairment, and 22 children with autism) were shown twelve pictures of animals and humans. The three groups of children were matched on mental age. Each child was asked to choose a picture in order to answer nine questions selected from existing tests and previous findings in the literature. This procedure allowed us to investigate what each animal represented to these three populations of children. The influence of morphological similarity, which can explain human preference for mammals, was also studied in a separate experiment. We found that the three mammals (dogs, cats, and horses) were perceived positively by both typical children and children with cognitive impairment (Principal component analysis Factor 1 "Positive Attributes"). Children with autism gave heterogeneous answers; therefore, it was more complicated to identify clearly what these animals meant to them. Pictures of humans were specifically associated with Factor 3 "Language-Based Relationship" of the principal component analysis. The possibility to touch the animal was an important factor of influence in the children's choices. The morphological similarity between animals and humans could partly explain the results obtained for dogs, cats, and horses. Identifying what specific animals represent to individual children could improve the therapeutic process and allow a more appropriate choice of animal for each child.

Keywords: [ANIMAL REPRESENTATIONS](#); [CHILDREN](#); [MORPHOLOGICAL SIMILARITY](#); [TACTILE MODALITY](#)

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