



Ethical Considerations in Animal Assisted Therapy

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A look at the potential potholes & the road ahead for AAT - Animal Assisted Therapy

By Kirby L. Wycoff, Psy.D, NCSP

From Reading Education Assistance Dogs, to Autism Support Dogs, and everything in between, we are seeing more and more animals serving humans in need. More recently, we have seen the likes of “Canine Support Dogs” or “Crisis Comfort Dogs” showing up in the aftermath of the school shootings, natural disasters and terrorist’s event. But even with such great need and human suffering, when animals are used in service of humans, the animal’s suitability and preparation for the work, as well as the handler’s ability to advocate for their AAI (Animal Assisted Intervention) partner, deserves our serious consideration.

With the heightened awareness of this type of therapeutic interaction, many pet owners are convinced that their dog has a “special gift” that will make him a brilliant “therapist.” But while many like myself chose a career in mental health services, our AAI partner animals have no choice—they are drafted into the role. Many of us, who may unknowingly lack the requisite knowledge and experience to do so, make the decision to draft our companion animals into the role of working animal.

A number of years ago, my Bichon Frise Sophia and I became certified through the Delta Society (now Pet Partners) as a therapy dog team. We were featured in this 2008 article [“Westminster’s Shining Angels”](#) and reading it now, I cringe at my own words:

“Sophia has always been interested in people. Even as a puppy she would

become calm when someone wanted to pet her. She loves her work as a therapy dog and can almost always bring a smile to the face of a child, even those who are terminally ill and undergoing chemotherapy.”

Wycoff, 2008

The reality is a bit different. It was me – not Sophia – who loved the volunteer work. Sophia loved being with me, but she didn’t love the visits with the terminally ill children. What she did love, was showing off her vast repertoire of tricks, which is ultimately how we did our visits. She would do tricks for the patients and they really seemed to enjoy the comic relief that this brought to an otherwise grim setting. It is true that with her humor and sunny personality, she does bring a smile to the face of most anyone she meets.

She had less interest in being embraced and cuddled by all of the children, but she tolerated it. She did so without much fuss or distress.

Because she is a relatively stable dog, she had an “Oh ok, if you want to do that, I’ll go along with it” attitude. But despite what I said (and believed to be true) in the article, Sophia isn’t really all that interested in socializing with unknown people. I learned over time that she is interested in certain people, but not all people.

What I have learned since is that she really loves spending time with people she knows. She is very sociable and

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interested in familiar people and the ongoing work she is doing now with small groups or individual clients over time, is a much better fit.

Once we establish that a specific client and Sophia are a good fit, she draws great pleasure in building a relationship and seeing that same client week after week. Even then, as her handler and advocate — before, during and after every interaction, I continue to ask the question “How is this for you?” (The Elemental Questions, Clothier, 2008).

With a more sophisticated way of assessing the fundamental characteristics of who Sophia is, along with a more precise understanding of how to monitor goodness of fit, Suzanne Clothier’s expertise has brought great depth and nuance to our work as an AAT team. The conceptual framework for Clothier’s “Relationship Centered Training” begins with the “Elemental Questions.” Use of this framework has enabled me to monitor Sophia’s effectiveness and willingness to participate in all aspects of client interactions.

The truth is that human needs, human wishes, human hopes and desires often cloud judgment and get in the way of our ability to truly see the animal. It is here, in the space between “a human in need” and “an animal to serve” where the possibility exists that animals can be exploited. It was only in the face of new information, new knowledge and collaboration with those who understand animals better than I do, that I realized I had made some assumptions in my work with Animal Assisted Therapy.

The reality (or at least my version of it) is that if we are truly to provide high quality services to humans with Animal Assisted Interventions, we need to protect and respect our animal partners in the process. This means that we have an obligation to engage in ethical and responsible decision-making in our selection of working animals. The questions are relatively simple, although, as I have learned, the answers are often not.

For me, it goes something like this:

- What are the unique demands of this specific job?
- What are the unique characteristics of this particular animal?
- Can we reasonably (fairly and humanely) expect that this particular animal can do this particular job?

Certainly there are incredible benefits that can occur when there is a goodness of fit between a client’s needs and a therapy animal’s skills and affinities.

I have watched in awe as a teenage abuse survivor reclaims her sense of self and works to establish clear boundaries through her experiences with a kind, patient and very persistent gray gelding.

I have sat spell bound as the child with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, increases his self-regulation and impulse control through the realization that the goats will indeed scatter and run away if he brings his intensity and lack of awareness into the barn.

I have supported the distressed family unit in their effort to better understand



their systemic dynamics through the observatory lens of a herd of cattle.

But when the fit is not right, it can be an unhappy mismatch or worse if the animal is anxious, afraid or even potentially dangerous. Things can go from bad to worse, and may put both the human client and animal partner at risk. One only has to listen to some of the untold stories in AAI—the ones that don't make the headlines - to know that goodness of fit is often overlooked in AAI animal selection:

- The “therapy dog” who greets clients in the waiting room with growls and air snaps. His handler—a mental health clinician—fails to see this as problem behavior because the dog is not “directly” working with clients.
- The “Canine Comfort” dog who travels with his handler to disaster sites, but who is so overwhelmed by the experience and anxious about the demands of the role, that he is unable to regularly eliminate or defecate and won't even touch his food while on the road.
- The sensitive horse selected by an Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT) program to provide equine assisted psychotherapy to large groups of participants three days a week. This horse is not naturally drawn to socialize with people. Not surprisingly, most days the staff can't even get him in from the pasture because he chooses to stay as far away as he possibly can from the barn (where the therapeutic interactions takes place).

These stories illustrate the need for tools to offer practitioners a viable way to assess and monitor an animal's suitability in the world of AAI — both for the animal's sake and to maximize the therapeutic benefit for all parties involved.

To explore these ideas further, Suzanne Clothier and I have come together from our respective professions with the common goal of helping humans and animals exist together in ways that respect and honor both ends of the leash. Suzanne and I share a vision that the human-centric view of AAI can be re-conceptualized on the premise of mutuality, anchored in the quality of the connection between two living, breathing, thinking, and feeling beings who come willingly together. It is here, in the quiet space of harmony, balance and reciprocity where the true joy and magic can unfold.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Kirby Wycoff and Suzanne Clothier are collaborating on a number of research projects around the use of the Clothier Animal Response Assessment Tool (CARAT) and the Relationship Assessment Tool (RAT) in Human-Animal Interactions. Together, they are developing “The Reflected Relationship” – a new model for the provision of Animal Assisted Therapy services, one that honors and respects the relationship above all else. The development of tools for AAT handlers to use in order to monitor the



effectiveness and potential distress of AAT animals will also be the focus of the work.

This will be the first in a series of guest and co-authored articles that take a closer look at both the human and animal perspective in Animal Assisted Therapy and Human-Animal Interactions. Stay tuned for a future article on the “Enjoyable - Endurable Continuum” in the selection and placement of therapy and service dogs.

Dr. Wycoff holds a Doctor of Psychology degree from the APA approved Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University, a Masters of Education in School Psychology from Columbia University and a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Lehigh University. She is a Nationally Certified School Psychologist and New York State Certified School Psychologist. Dr. Wycoff also sits on the governing board of the [American Psychological Association’s, Section 13, Division 17 – “Human-Animal Interactions.”](#)

Dr. Wycoff recently completed her post-doctoral residency at a residential school for high-risk youth in the North Eastern United States. Dr. Wycoff completed her APA approved internship at the same site and over the course of her tenure there, developed multi-species AAT group programming for students across grades pre-K through 12 with a particular focus on the development of social-emotional competence. She recently presented on this work at the 150th Anniversary of the American Veterinary Medical Association and International

Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations Annual Conference in Chicago this summer.

Currently, Dr. Wycoff serves as a tenure track faculty member at Worcester State University in Central Massachusetts, where she is teaching at both the graduate and undergraduate level. She enjoys working with her students in the NASP approved graduate program of School Psychology, where she is responsible for all of their clinical training. These students, and future mental health professionals, have the opportunity to learn about animals in the family system, human-animal interactions, Animal Assisted Therapy and the potential links between family violence and animal abuse. Dr. Wycoff’s research program will focus on Human-Animal Interactions and the various related aspects of Human Animal Interactions, with a particular focus on efficacy, theory, clinical application and ethical considerations.

Dr. Wycoff lives in Central Massachusetts and shares her life with Sophia (7-year old Bichon Frise), Cricket (2-year old Border Collie), Bodhi (1-year old tabby cat) and Shady (a 4-year old Off the Track Thoroughbred). She enjoys training animals of all kinds, participating in dog sports, clicker training her cat and trail riding with friends.