Evaluating College Student Interest in Pet Therapy

Kathleen N. Adamle RN, PhD, AOCN, Tracy A. Riley RN, PhD & Tracey Carlson RN, MSN

To cite this article: Kathleen N. Adamle RN, PhD, AOCN, Tracy A. Riley RN, PhD & Tracey Carlson RN, MSN (2009) Evaluating College Student Interest in Pet Therapy, Journal of American College Health, 57:5, 545-548, DOI: 10.3200/JACH.57.5.545-548

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.3200/JACH.57.5.545-548

Published online: 07 Aug 2010.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 842

Citing articles: 19 View citing articles
Evaluating College Student Interest in Pet Therapy

Kathleen N. Adamle, RN, PhD, AOCN; Tracy A. Riley, RN, PhD; Tracey Carlson, RN, MSN

Abstract. The first year of college can be extremely stressful, especially for students residing on campus. **Objective:** The authors obtained information from college freshmen about their relationships with pets and investigated interest in a pet therapy program as social support for transient stressful periods. **Participants:** As part of a university orientation program, 246 college freshman attended 1 of 5 health issues sessions offered during the 2006–2007 academic year. Approximately 50 freshmen attended each session. **Method:** Participants completed a questionnaire at the beginning of the session, followed by a 20-minute presentation about pet therapy that ended with pet therapy visitation. **Results:** Students identified that visits with certified pet therapy dogs could be beneficial to college freshman during their first year away from home. **Conclusions:** These students indicated that a pet therapy program could temporarily fill the absence of previous support systems and be a catalyst for establishing new social relationships.

Keywords: college students, mental health, pet therapy

Because a new college student has not yet developed primary relationships at the university setting, attachment-related stress can lead to a poor college experience and dissatisfaction with the life transition. Pets are pervasive in the United States; more than 72 million dogs and nearly 82 million cats reside in American homes. In 2006, half of all pet owners considered their pets to be members of the family. Recent literature on social support and quality of life indicates that having a network of relationships, including pets, results in better health, and there is evidence to suggest a therapeutic role of pets for human support.

Pet therapy has been used successfully for managing stress in populations with diverse illnesses and in disaster situations; however, reports of this intervention in relatively healthy populations experiencing transient periods of significant stress, such as college students, have not been reported.

Pet therapy may be the catalyst to begin an establishment of social relationships and lessen the attachment-related stress experienced by freshman college students. The purpose of this preliminary study was to obtain background information from freshmen college students about their relationships with pets and investigate interest in having a pet therapy program on campus as social support for transient stressful periods.

**METHOD**

**Design, Setting, and Sample**

This preliminary cross-sectional study was conducted at a large public northeastern Ohio university. Although the university has a multiple-campus network, the study was conducted only on the largest campus (almost 23,000 students), as it has the largest percent of degree-seeking, first-time freshman (approximately 3,800 students). The majority of these first-time freshman (82%) reside in university-owned or -operated housing on campus.
All incoming students were required to attend 2 university orientation sessions each semester of their first year. Orientation sessions on this campus were developed to help freshmen acclimate to their new surroundings, and the students may self-select sessions based on a variety of topics. Sessions include topics such as protection and safety, university health services’ health promotion center, women’s health services, psychological services, and a nutritional outreach program. Students self-registering for our health issues orientation session were aware in advance that animals would be present. All students attending our health issues session during the 2006–2007 academic year were informed about the research study when the session began, and all agreed to participate; thus, a total of 246 students were surveyed during 5 separate orientation sessions. Each session averaged 50 freshman students.

**Procedure**

Students attending the health issues session about alternative and complementary therapy using pets were provided a 2-part questionnaire upon entering the environment. A cover sheet was attached to the questionnaire that explained the purpose of the study, Institutional Review Board and Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee approval, university administrative support, risks and benefits involved in participation, and anonymity of participants. Consent, completion, and collection of the questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes at the beginning of our orientation session. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect background data from students about their pets; determine if students had knowledge of pet therapy programs, if they had interaction with pet therapy programs in the past, and if they would enjoy a visit from a pet therapy program while living away from home.

After the questionnaires were collected, the pet therapy teams (6 dogs and their 6 human handlers) entered the room. The first author introduced all the pet therapy teams and gave a 20-minute presentation on alternative and complementary support theories and pet therapy programs in general. At the end of the presentation, the students were asked if they had questions or if they could describe past experiences with any pet therapy program. All student participants and team interactions were recorded by a program member, thereby providing data for future qualitative analysis. After the question-and-answer period, the therapy teams (handler and dog) mingled among the participants so the students could have physical contact with the certified therapy dogs and interact with the handlers (see Figure 1).

**Measures**

**Pet Therapy Program Questionnaire**

This 2-part questionnaire was developed to assess issues related to the human–animal bond. Part A of the questionnaire contained multiple choice questions used to collect sociodemographic information of interest necessary to describe the sample. Part B included 13 yes or no questions designed to elicit information from each: for example, (1) having a family pet at home and their perceived value of the pet within their family, (2) previous knowledge of pet therapy programs, (3) their opinions about receiving a visit from pet therapy teams while living on campus, and (4) any possible perceived benefits after receiving a visit from the pet therapy teams.

Prior to its use, the questionnaire was reviewed for content validity by 2 PhD-prepared faculty researchers with expertise in the area of mental health. Following item review and refinement, the questionnaire was deemed suitable for use in this preliminary study.

**Analysis**

Quantitative data were entered into a data management and analysis program (SPSS version 15.0, Chicago, SPSS Inc). Entries were verified for accuracy and the data were analyzed descriptively. When indicated, differences were evaluated with the Mann–Whitney U test at $p = .05$.

Qualitative data were provided in 2 ways. Participant comments written on the research questionnaires were transferred to a word-processing program. Similarly, student participant comments recorded during the interactive presentation portion of the session were transcribed from the written notes into the word-processing program. All entries were verified for accuracy prior to analysis.

**RESULTS**

Participants in this sample were fairly homogeneous; they were predominantly single (98%, $n = 242$), white (91%, $n = 224$), and female (85%, $n = 206$). Ages ranged from 17–25 years ($M = 18.3$ years, $SD = 0.8$ years). The majority of participants (91%, $n = 221$) indicated they had a pet at home; 75% of the sample had dogs, 46% had cats. Other pets reported included birds, fish, reptiles, and farm animals; however, the numbers of those pets were insufficient for additional analyses.

A majority of participants with pets at home considered them an integral part of their life (92.5%, $n = 221$) and indicated receiving support and comfort during stressful times when interacting with their pets (90.3%, $n = 214$). Sufficient numbers of cat and dog owners were present to examine...
differences in support/comfort based on type of pet. Those with dogs at home overwhelmingly conveyed support and comfort received from their pet (76.6%, n = 183; Mann–Whitney U = 4,024, p = .00). Those with cats at home failed to report significant perceptions of support/comfort.

Data were then analyzed on the sample for findings specific to pet therapy programs. Only 41% (n = 100) reported having heard about pet therapy in the past. However, the majority of those having heard about pet therapy programs also reported some experience with that therapy (n = 84). An overwhelming majority of freshman (96%, n = 239) expressed positive student interest in the possibility of introducing a pet therapy program on their campus.

Written comments provided by the participants on the questionnaires were examined for recurrent themes. Three themes were identified: Students who had pets at home missed them, indicated interest in a pet therapy program on campus, and wanted the pets to visit their resident halls. Representative written comments included the following: “I miss my own dog so much, it would be nice to have one close by,” and “Will this program be available for students on campus at any time?” One student wrote about her personal experience while being a patient in a hospital setting: “I had pet therapy visits when I was at Children’s Hospital, and the visits were what I really looked forward to having each day.” These results and similar comments provided preliminary student support for initiating a pet therapy program on campus.

COMMENT

Initial support for beginning a pet therapy program with freshman college students was provided by these participants. The majority of participants indicated that they had left family pets at home, missed their pets while at school, and believed that pet therapy visits would be beneficial as an additional support program for stressful periods.

Results from this preliminary study indicated that a pet therapy program could be accepted by first-time residential freshman college students and may provide beneficial support. Pet therapy may be a catalyst to establish new social relationships among college freshman and provide a bridge for the break in attachment from their previous supportive network.

Further studies are needed to provide an understanding of the underlying psychosocial mechanisms of the human–animal relationship and its effectiveness for therapeutic benefits with healthy people, such as college students. However, the purpose of this preliminary study was to obtain background information from freshmen college students about their relationships with pets and investigate interest in having a pet therapy program on campus as social support for transient stressful periods. This investigation with college students is the first step in assessing interest in bringing a pet therapy program to a college campus for adjunct social support.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations with this preliminary study. Students self-selected to attend the health issues session, knowing in advance animals would be present; therefore, they may have had more interest in pet therapy than other freshman students. Participants were mostly young, single, white females; it is unknown if there would be similar interest with more diverse residential college freshman. Findings are also limited by the dichotomous nature of the pet therapy program questionnaire. Subtle nuances in participant responses were not possible, and it may be more advantageous to include a Likert-type response format. The findings are also limited in that subjective self-report data were collected regarding individuals’ past relationships with animals and their projected prediction of other students’ desires for interaction with pet therapy dogs.

Despite these limitations, preliminary support for a pet therapy program was indicated by this sample of incoming college freshman. Based on these findings, implementation of a pilot pet therapy program with visitation to residence halls as an intervention for students experiencing transient stress has been initiated. Once the program is established as an adjunct support at the university, future studies to refine specifics of the pet therapy intervention complete with “dosage” intervals needs to be done with diverse samples in diverse settings. Additional measures of the human–animal relationship need to be developed and tested prior to use in large-scale studies to better understand this phenomenon. In addition, variables such as an individual’s positive or negative affinity for pets, an individual’s cultural background, and the implications of previously owning a pet need to be included in future research to clarify beneficial outcomes of a pet therapy program on a college campus.

NOTE

For comments and further information, address correspondence to Kathleen Adamle, Kent State University, College of Nursing, Henderson Hall, Kent, OH 44242, USA (e-mail: kadamle@kent.edu).

REFERENCES