



Animal Assisted Programmes –
consultation, research, realisation of projects, training and evaluation for specialists and handler-animal teams

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AIUCA INTRODUCTION:

FOUNDED: April 1990 in Milano, Italy

MISSION: Improvement of the psychological and physical conditions of persons with disability and/or social hardship through the employment and/or placement of suitable animals.

AFFILIATIONS:

- Italian representative and european ambassador for Delta Society®
- Full member ADEu Assistance Dogs Europe
- Italian national member of IAHAIO, International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations
- Affiliated Delta Society® Pet Partners®
- Core teachers for the Master in AAA/AAT at the University of Perugia, Italy


MAIN ACTIVITIES:



- Training and placement of suitable animals since 1990
- Participation in Animal Assisted Programmes since 1994
- Participation in research programmes on the efficacy of Animal Assisted Programmes
- Organization training courses in Animal Assisted Programmes for handlers and health/education specialists and evaluations of animal/handler teams since 1998
- Consultation for starting Animal Assisted Programmes and for training programmes since 1994
- Public education regarding assistance dogs and AAA/AAT/AAE since 1990
- Presentations of work and research in various national and international conferences since 1994

There have been many developments in the field of Animal Assisted Programmes (AAP) since the beginning of it's modern history in the 1950's and one very interesting field of application is in mental health.

Boris Levinson, a North American child psychiatrist, had his first experiences with an animal assisting in therapy in a quite accidental situation in 1954. He worked with children with autism and one particular boy who was very severely withdrawn with whom he could not establish a

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relationship. The boy accidentally meet up with Levinson and his dog and immediately showed interest in the dog. The therapist decided to integrate the dog into the therapy sessions finding that the dog served as an ice-breaker, softening the child's defenses, providing a focus for communication; with the animal present, Levinson could join in, establish a rapport, and begin therapy. He found that AAT worked well with children who were nonverbal, inhibited, autistic, schizophrenic, withdrawn, culturally disadvantaged. And he found the dog particularly beneficial in helping to strengthen autistic children's contact with reality.

Levinson began to study the effects of dogs in therapy with the children he treated and he was the first to write seriously and extensively about it, sparking widespread interest.

Scientists and health care professionals have since put Levinson's theories into practice in scores of therapeutic settings, and their results consistently showed animals can improve morale and communication, bolster self-esteem, increase quality of life. Psychiatrists Corson and Corson were two of the first to expand on Levinson's work, and in a 1977 study found that 47 out of 50 patients in a psychiatric institute made great improvement in their treatment when dogs were integrated into the programme. The dogs acted as a social catalyst, forging a positive link between patients and staff.

Beck and Katcher spoke in their research about the *component of touch* – our ability to touch pets and their ability to touch us – gives the relationship between pets and people a quality of therapeutic intimacy, one that is both like and unlike the kind you might find with a traditional therapist. "The difficult art in therapy," they wrote, "is achieving a mutual feeling of intimacy without touching".


One author, Jerome, put it slightly differently: He wrote, "Dogs never talk about themselves but listen to you while you talk about yourself, and keep up an appearance of being interested in the conversation." Of course, we who work in the field might add that a big difference between dogs and therapists is that the dog can jump up and lick you, nuzzle you with his nose, let you kiss and hug him anytime the impulse strikes.



With a dog, the component of touch comes more easily. In a 1981 study in Australia, the 60 residents of an elderly care home who were involved in a visiting dog programme were rated as happier, more alert and responsive; they smiled and laughed more often and displayed more optimism about life. Members of a control group with no contact with dogs were less relaxed, more withdrawn, and less interested in others.

Over the years, programme after programme and study after study has supported such findings. Depressed patients in nursing homes have become more interactive and optimistic when visited by animals; prison inmates have become less isolated, less violent, more responsible, and have exhibited increased morale; visiting animals have helped ease feelings of fear, despair, loneliness, and isolation among terminally ill patients; troubled inner city kids have benefited from the presence of animals, becoming more responsive and optimistic, more communicative and responsible, more compassionate. (One aspect of social-emotional development in children is empathy, the ability to understand how someone else feels. Some researchers believe that by interacting with pets that are totally dependent on them and their families, children learn to understand the feelings and needs of animals and those of fellow human beings from an early age - the compassion children feel towards pets, is related to their empathy towards humans.)

Some psychotherapists employ animals in their everyday practice, individual therapy sessions. Many clients find it easier to open, to confide, to express themselves more freely in the presence of an animal that seems to care for them no matter what they say.

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In Italy, AIUCA has had many experiences in the field in the last 15 years. One memorable programme was with adolescent girls living in a communal setting. Their problems included attempted suicide, bulimia and others. They were uncooperative with the therapist and were most hesitant to participate in group therapy until a dog was introduced into some of the group sessions.

Another programme is with very young children living under court (juridical) protection in a community setting after removal from their home with their birth parents. In the presence of the dog and handler, the children are much more open and inquisitive and the work of the psychologists treating them is facilitated.

One particular programme which will be presented at the next IAHAIO conference in Tokyo in October involves institutionalised adults with psycho-physical and/or psychiatric disabilities in a chronic phase. The 13 adults are all affected by some organic deficiency such as cognitive disorders, alcoholic dementia, etc and anomalous behaviour problems. Two special needs teachers who work in the institute daily and a dog and handler team work in the Animal Assisted Programme.

The overall objectives are to move the concentration of the residents from their own personal needs and discomfort, potentialise individual resources, channel frail and unstable emotions, and also certain uncontrolled impulsiveness, so that they might assume and carry out finalised tasks. In the presence of the dog, the residents show a natural sense of nurturing, leading to their activation in various tasks related to the dog's care, tasks that they initiate and perform themselves. Certain residents who are normally very passive to external stimulation and inhibited in their relational and communicative capacities, have reached very positive results. It seems that touching, petting and taking care of the dog has awoken in them strong emotions tied to past experiences which leads them to seek out interaction with others, often also with the dog handler and the special needs educators, in order to share the pleasure of recounting their experiences.

Some other positive influences noted are:

- Willingness to help others
- Respect for others needs and timing
- Modification of communication with precise expression
- Increased capacity to control emotivity
- Increased ability to enjoy the moment
- less suffering of psychotic fixations, therefore leading to increased well-being and a decrease in aggression.

Of course, as in all well functioning programmes, mutual understanding and agreement between the handler and the educators, investment in the objectives and intentions in a projectual synergy towards assuring the well being of both the dog and the residents has been fundamental to the outcome.

This is an exciting and inviting field that I want to stress, that although *is not* a panacea for all ills does offer much possibility for helping persons with various problems, disabilities and social handicaps. May all professionals who work in the field be stimulated to explore the possibilities of implementing AAP in their treatment plans.

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