

The Role of Pets in the Lives of Autistic Adults

Laurel Lenz¹, Jenna Hansen, Jaclyn Schumacher¹, Hanna Lee, Bill Wong², Barbara Kornblau¹

¹Idaho State University, Pocatello, Idaho, United States; ²Stanbridge University, Irvine, California, United States

DOI: 10.5014/ajot.2022.76S1-PO197

Date presented: April 1, 2022

Primary Author and Speaker: Laurel Lenz, Lenzlaur@isu.edu

PURPOSE: Knowledge gained about the roles of pets and the experiences of autistic adults may help to improve and construct occupational therapy interventions to encourage participation and improve every day functioning, sleep, and sensory experiences. Due to the lack of research in this area, this study focused on an exploration of the effects that pets can have on the lives of autistic adults.

DESIGN: This qualitative study explored the role of pets in the lives of autistic adults through an online survey of open-ended questions, via Qualtrics. It used a community-based participatory research approach, partnering with a team of autistic adult researchers, including and autistic occupational therapists within the community. Participants were recruited from closed, online, social media support groups/communities, including Facebook and Twitter. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data.

METHOD: Following approval from the IRB, participants were recruited from Facebook and online, social media groups, and communities. Recruitment messages provided participants with a URL link to the online survey. Inclusion criteria included people who identify as autistic adults, are over 18, proficient in English and own a pet. Data was analyzed until saturation was reached by multiple researchers, to ensure rigor, the trustworthiness of the data, and triangulation. Using a community-based participatory research approach, eight researchers, including two experienced qualitative researchers, and a team of four qualified autistic adult researchers, and four OT graduate students coded themes through an iterative, inductive, and deductive process.

RESULTS: A total of 12 participants met the inclusion criteria and completed the survey. Participants included 6 females, 3 males, and 3 non-binary participants, ranging in from 24 to 64. Many participants reported that their pets were like family. Thematic analysis showed that pets have a positive impact on the well-being of autistic adult participants and provide companionship to them. Participants reported their pets were “family members,” who provided companionship in their lives, and a role so significant that it was indescribable. Participants described their feelings towards their pets and the feelings they experience as pet owners within the following themes: “love,” “love and caring,” and “attachment needs.” The final themes for how the participants incorporate pets into their daily activities included “companionship and enjoyment,” and an important part of their routine.

CONCLUSION: Pets play an important role in the lives of autistic adults. This study showed that autistic adults saw their pets as family members and reported that they provided them with companionship, routine, and needed support. Incorporating pets into their daily lives showed an increase in their sense of purpose, health, and well-being. Pets provided a sense of belonging that included strong feelings that met attachment needs as if the pets were family members.

IMPACT STATEMENT: Pets can be a powerful tool to promote participation and well-being in the lives of autistic adults and occupational therapists can incorporate pets into treatment to improve the quality of life for autistic adults.

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