

Investigating Human–Animal Interactions in Homes of Children With Autism

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Research has consistently shown that animal-assisted therapies can be beneficial for mental and physical needs within vulnerable populations. Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have differences in social skills, communication, and behavior and could benefit from ongoing human-animal interactions in the home environment. The Observation of Human Animal Interaction for Research (OHAIRE) coding tool has proved to be a promising way to code home-based interactions with children with ASD and their animals in their homes through quantitative data. 2). To explore the lived experiences of animal ownership in families of children with ASD through qualitative interviews. Results included 10 individuals with varying ASD severity based on Social Responsiveness Scale, varying income ranges, and age. Quantitative results showed age was strongly associated with higher touch, gesture, and affection scores; children with severe ASD had the lowest and children with moderate ASD had the highest total human-animal interaction scores. Qualitative analysis revealed three major themes within the participant interviews: child development, family considerations, and comfort. Animal ownership supports child development, particularly in areas of responsibility, communication, and empathy and understanding for the world. All ten families indicated the animals provide stress and anxiety relief and added comfort to the child's life. Animal type, size, and cost were considerations for families when owning an animal. Future OT's should consider meaningful occupations for individuals with ASD and understand naturalistic interventions, such as animal ownership, in the home environment that can advance the lives of children with ASD.

References

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