

The Impact of Animal-Assisted Learning on Emotional Wellbeing and Engagement with Reading

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Abstract : Introduction: Animal-assisted learning (AAL) interventions are increasing exponentially, yet a paucity of quality research in the field exists. The aim of this study was to evaluate how the promotion of emotional wellbeing, through AAL, in this case, a dog, may support children's engagement with reading in a Primary 1 classroom. Research indicates that dogs can provide emotional support to children; by forming a trusting attachment with a non-critical 'friend' who confers unconditional positive regard on the child, confidence may be boosted and anxiety reduced. By promoting emotional wellbeing through interactions with the dog, it is hoped that children begin to associate reading with feelings of wellbeing, which then results in increased engagement with reading. Methodology: A review of the literature was conducted. The relationship between emotional wellbeing and learning was explored, followed by an examination of the literature relating to Animal-Assisted Therapy and AAL. Scottish educational policy and legislation were analysed to establish the extent to which AAL might be suitable for the Scottish pedagogical context. An empirical study was conducted in a mainstream Primary 1 classroom over a four-week period. An inclusive approach was adopted whereby all children that wanted to interact with the dog were given the opportunity to do so, and all 25 children subsequently chose to participate. Children were not withdrawn from the classroom. Primary methods included interviews, observations, and questionnaires. Three focus children were selected for closer study. Main Results: Results were remarkably close to previous research and literature. Children's emotional wellbeing was boosted, and engagement in reading improved. Principal Conclusions and Implications for Field: It was concluded that AAL could support emotional wellbeing and, in turn, promote children's engagement with reading. The main limitation of the study was its short-term nature, and a longer randomised controlled trial with a larger sample, currently being undertaken by the author, would provide a fuller answer to the research question. Barriers to AAL include health and safety concerns and steps to ensure the welfare of the dog.

Keywords : animal-assisted learning, emotional wellbeing, reading, reading to dogs

Conference Title : ICEA 2022 : International Conference on Ethology and Anthrozoology

Conference Location : Prague, Czechia

Conference Dates : September 08-09, 2022