

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) Utilization by Pediatric Dentists and Residency Programs

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Introduction

- AAT has been used in various healthcare settings to help anxious patients and has shown health benefits such as reduction in blood pressure (1), reduced perception of pain in pediatric patients (2), and overall positive psychosocial improvement with people with intellectual disabilities (3).
- A pilot study using AAT in dentistry found blood pressure was reduced midway through the procedure (4) but other benefits of AAT were not explored.
- In a survey of caregivers of pediatric dental patients, 90% said they would support integration of AAT in a dental practice (5). Based on safety of non-pharmacological behavior management and acceptance of caregivers, the increased utilization of AAT in dental setting warrants further investigation.

Objectives

- Evaluate prevalence of AAT utilization in pediatric dental practices in the US and Canada.
- Evaluate prevalence of AAT utilization in pediatric dental residency programs.
- Information gathered from this study will allow a greater understanding of the utilization of this non-pharmacological behavior guidance technique in pediatric dental practices and residency training programs.

Methods

IRB-approved cross-sectional survey (IRB #2021-0639).

Inclusion criteria:

- Survey to private pediatric dentist (PD) practitioners: Member of American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry.
- Survey to pediatric dentistry residency program directors (RD): Current pediatric dentistry residency program directors in US/ Canada.
- Data collected in Survey Monkey sent via email and was anonymous.

Results

Total PD respondents: 593/6603 (9%)

Total RD respondents: 21/105 (20.4%)

Pediatric Dentists (PD) N= 593	
Received didactic training on AAT	31 (5.2%)
Received clinical training on AAT	18 (3%)
Uses AAT in clinical practice	80 (13.5%)

The three most common reasons pediatric dentist do not use AAT are:

They don't know the regulations for use	301 (50.8%)
No access to therapy animal	245 (41.3%)
Infection control	231 (39.0%)

The three biggest risks associated with the utilization of AAT are for pediatric dentists are:

Infection control	337 (56.8%)
Patients' fear of animal	329 (55.5%)
Allergic reaction to animal	310 (52.3%)

Residency Directors (RD) N = 21	
Residents receive didactic training on AAT	2 (9.5%)
Residents receive clinical training on AAT	2 (9.5%)
Uses AAT in clinical practice	2 (9.5%)

Three most common reasons pediatric dental residency programs do not use AAT are:

Infection control	11 (52.4%)
No access to therapy animal	8 (38.1%)
They don't know the regulations for use	8 (38.1%)

The three biggest risks associated with the utilization of AAT are for pediatric dental residency programs are:

Infection control	16 (76.2%)
Allergic reaction to animal	13 (61.9%)
Patients' fear of animal	12 (57.1%)

PDs and RDs beliefs regarding AAT

Category	PD (%)	RD (%)
Demand for integration of AAT	60.5	42.9
AAT is a behavior guidance technique	81.3	66.7
Interested in incorporating AAT	53.9	64.7

PD responses:

- Use of AAT increases patient satisfaction (94.9%) and staff satisfaction (91%).
- AAT reduces a child’s anxiety (76.3%).
- AAT acts as a distraction that could be accomplished by other techniques (73.5%).
- For each decrease of about 5 years in practice, the odds of believing AAT is a behavior guidance technique increase with odds of 1.28 (p value=0.01).

Conclusions

- PDs and RDs believe there is a demand for integration of AAT into practice.
- PDs believe the use of AAT increases patient and staff satisfaction.
- Most PDs and RDs feel that the use of AAT in conjunction with other non-pharmacologic behavior guidance techniques would result in better appointments.
- Most PDs and RDs are interested in implementing AAT, but are not familiar with state regulations.

References

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