

Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) Proposed Guidance for Practice for Canada

This work-in-progress document was originally created in 2014 as part of the work undertaken by the national committee serving the Canadian Task Force on Animal-Assisted Interventions. This committee had worked to achieve this goal since 2010 and it was written by the chair at that time.

Prelude

Animal Assisted Interventions (AAIs) are interventions which are based upon the belief that interactions with animals have inherent value for humans on behavioural, cognitive, emotional, physical, psychological, relational and spiritual levels. AAIs are carried out by qualified animal handlers; helping professionals through, and with, specially screened, trained and certified animals.

Although there is evidence to support the benefits of partnering with animals in all ways aforementioned, there is no standard code of practice for how it is done in Canada. Providing guidance to those interested in AAIs as well as assisting to ensure that AAIs are delivered in the best interest of the participant, the animal and the facilitator is the intention of this guidance document.

A group of like-minded individuals from across Canada have been working on developing standards for practice in AAI since 2010. This group consisted of AAI practitioners, psychologists, master's level clinicians and an individual specializing in standards development.

There are a variety of ways in which people are partnering with animals to help people. AAIs range from volunteers taking their certified therapy animal to interact with groups of people who otherwise have no contact with outsiders or animals, (e.g., seniors) to individual health professionals who may be bringing their animal into individual therapeutic sessions, (e.g., mental health therapists who are integrating animal assisted therapy into their practices.) AAIs are becoming more popular here in Canada and a guide to informed practice has become necessary. Each method of AAI involves various roles and responsibilities for those conducting the sessions as well as for the organizations or facilities requesting them and an awareness and adherence to ethical animal care and welfare.

This proposed Canadian Guidance for Practice for AAIs may serve as a bridge between the intent of the future Code of Ethics and the minimum requirements that will be set by the future Standards of Practice. It is aspirational and is recommended as a guide for practice which is intended to assist practitioners to deliver safe and ethical interventions which protect the welfare of both humans and animals. It may be used by anyone who is either currently or intending to partner with animals to assist people. This includes individuals, organizations, businesses, charities, schools and any other institution that may be conducting AAI sessions.

It is recommended that anyone intending to partner with animals in this regard consult with professionals in the health, veterinary, psychological, social welfare and animal behavior / training sectors as is necessary when developing AAI programs.

This guide seeks to address the roles and responsibilities of all involved in AAI programs and to clarify steps which can be undertaken to ensure the delivery of safe, effective and ethical AAIs. It is not intended to provide a step-by-step instruction on how to deliver AAIs as each situation and program will be different due to the uniqueness of people and animals. It is not intended to serve as a code of ethics or as standards of practice.

Working with animals in a healing or therapeutic format has many names and is done in many different ways. As the field is not yet standardized in Canada, it can be confusing trying to understand all the different kinds of animal-related work and where your particular practice, skills and knowledge might fit.

Other places in North America and the world have been incorporating animals into healing and learning practices for far longer than here in Canada and as a result, there are some commonly agreed upon terms. Many of the definitions used within this document are taken from Pet Partners, formerly named The Delta Society, which is an organization in the United States that certifies people and animals to do AAIs, provides resources on AAIs and are considered experts in the field as they are a large resource for Animal Assisted practitioners in the United States. The following are some common terms in the field of AAIs:

Animal Assisted Interventions (AAIs)

"(AAIs) are therapeutic processes that intentionally include or involve animals as part of the therapeutic process. Animal-Assisted Therapy, Animal-Assisted Activities, and service animals are some examples of animal assisted interventions." Fine (2006)

AAI is an umbrella term for all aspects of involving animals to facilitate or enhance human health and learning. Every other term for working with animals to help people in any capacity falls under the bracket of the term Animal Assisted Interventions (AAIs).

Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT)

"AAT is a goal-directed intervention in which an animal that meets specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT is directed and/or delivered by a health/human service professional with specialized expertise in AAT, and within the scope of practice of his/her profession (From Standards of Practice for Animal-Assisted Activities and Therapy) **Pet Partners**

Key Features of AAT

- There are specified goals and objectives for each individual.
- A qualified professional is involved in the animal interactions for a specific purpose.
- This professional is trained in AAT (preferably certified) to conduct AAT
- Progress is measured.

Examples of goals of AAT Programs:

Animals can be incorporated into a variety of programs. The following are some examples of AAT goals:

Physical Health - Improve fine motor skills, wheelchair skills, standing, balance

Mental Health and Cognitive Ability - Increase self-esteem, reduce anxiety, reduce loneliness, increase attention skills, process traumatic events, aid in long- or short-term memory, emotion regulation, increase healthy communication

Social Skills - Increase verbal interactions between group members, develop leisure/recreation skills, increase vocabulary

Developing and increasing Empathy Improving overall quality of life

Animal Assisted Education and/or Learning (AAE/L)

AAE/L is a form of AAA which incorporates animals into the learning environment. The Visiting Animal in educational settings is either the subject of the lesson plan to facilitate the learning plan, or to enhance the environment for learning to take place. AAE/L can be carried out in an educational setting or as an educational tool outside the classroom. AAE/L is often carried out by qualified teachers or aides but sometimes by knowledgeable volunteers. Often times, goals are defined and in some cases outcome measures are recorded.

Key Features of AAE/L

- An animal is included to enhance or facilitate the learning process.
- Educators, aides or knowledgeable volunteers facilitate the learning through the animal interactions.
- Visit content is planned and can be within or outside the classroom environment.

Examples of AAE/L

- Reading Assistance programs where animals are present as a motivator to help people who are reading-challenged. The reading-disabled participants read to the animal.

Animal Assisted Activities (AAA)

"AAA provides opportunities for motivational, educational, recreational, and/or therapeutic benefits to enhance quality of life. AAA are delivered in a variety of environments by specially trained professionals, paraprofessionals, and/or volunteers, in association with animals that meet specific criteria." Pet Partners

What does this mean?

AAA are basically the casual "meet and greet" activities that involve animals visiting people. The same activity can be repeated with many people, there are not typically any particular or measurable goals and the "visit" does not have to be carried out by a qualified professional. This is often referred to as "Pet Therapy" or "Pet Visitation." Pet Therapy is an outdated term and Pet Visitation is more recently acceptable in the practice. Sometimes there are professionals involved but goals are not typically measured.

Key Features of AAA

- Specific treatment goals are not planned for each visit.
- Volunteers and treatment providers are not required to take detailed notes.
- The animal is recommended to be certified for its work.
- Visit content is spontaneous and visits last as long or as short as needed.

Examples of AAA:

- A group of volunteers take their certified dogs and cats to a nursing home once a month to "visit." The visit occurs as a large-group activity with some direction and assistance provided by facility staff. The volunteer group facilitator keeps an informal log about who was visited.

Animal Assisted Crisis Response (AACR)

"Animal Assisted Crisis Response (AACR) is a discipline closely related to Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT), which gives crisis intervention teams, counselors, clergy, and other trained professionals an additional means with which to help people affected by crisis. AACR is a relatively new field but can be effective when utilized as part of an overall incident response program. AACR teams can be used, for example, to establish rapport, build therapeutic bridges, normalize the experience, and act as an agent or as a catalyst for physical movement. Effective AACR requires a common language between the AACR teams and crisis counselors." Greenbaum, S.D. (2006).

What does this mean?

AACR involves a skilled professional working with an animal to alleviate the stress and anxiety of people in crisis. These professionals work alongside a screened, trained and certified therapy animal and are trained in the proper protocols for helping people in crisis situations. The animals are there to relieve stress and build bridges for first responders.

Key Features of AACR

- Specific treatment goals are not planned for each visit.
- The overall intent is to help people at the moment of crisis and to alleviate the side effects of crisis.
- AACR professionals are cross trained in crisis protocols.

Example of AACR:

- A person is rescued from a burning house and is too traumatized to respond to questions of whether or not there is anyone else in the house. A trained and certified dog travels with the fire department and is handled by someone practicing AACR. The AACR specialist, with the help of the dog, assists the survivor of the fire to become de-escalated and lucid enough to tell the firefighters if anyone else was in the house

Facilitators – Those persons responsible for conducting the AAI session. This could be a qualified professional conducting AAT or an animal handler conducting an AAA session.

Animal Handlers - Those persons responsible for monitoring the animal's stress levels, communications, interactions and behavior during the AAI. Sometimes this person will be the facilitator and sometimes, especially in AAA, this person will be the dog's owner.

Population – The type or group of people that the AAI may be conducted with. For example, this could refer to seniors, children with autism, etc.

Setting – The place the AAI occurs in. For example, an office of a mental health professional conducting individualized one-one AAI or a nursing home where AAA is provided.

Sections

1. Facilitators
2. Animal Handlers
3. Participants
4. Animals
5. Program Considerations

1. Facilitators

Facilitators of AAIs can be qualified professionals practicing AAT, AAE/L, AACR or volunteers conducting AAA. There are two conceptual models for AAI. The triangle model describes the interaction between the AAI facilitator, the client and the animal-partner. The diamond model includes the presence of an AAI facilitator in conjunction with an animal handler (see Appendix A). Regardless of whether you are the sole facilitator in an AAI (triangle model) or the co-facilitating animal handler (diamond model), you should fully understand and be competent in your role.

1.1 Qualifications and Scope of Practice

If conducting anything other than AAA, facilitators should be qualified in their profession and adhere to the code of ethics of their governing body to uphold best practices. Facilitators should stay within the scope of their knowledge and experience both within the populations that they work and within the animal species or breed that they are familiar with. If the facilitator is an animal handler conducting AAA, they should be skilled in working in the populations and settings they are serving as well as be qualified and experienced to handle their animal.

1.2 Training and Knowledge

All facilitators should be trained in AAIs in addition to being skilled and experienced in the human populations they are working in. Professionals and animal handlers who are co-facilitating AAIs should be cross trained to each other's role in the AAI. Anyone responsible for the animal in the interactions should be knowledgeable about animal behavior and practice humane and ethical animal handling, training, care and welfare. They should also ensure their animals are screened, tested, vet checked and approved and certified for their work within the AAI. Certificates in AAI are available at the college level in some provinces in Canada (i.e., Alberta and Quebec).

1.3 Consultation and Mentoring Support

Ongoing training and consultations in ethical practices for effective AAIs are recommended for all involved in AAIs. Garnering training and/or consultation from skilled, well-known and ethical AAT practitioners is recommended. Consultations with skilled and trustworthy animal trainers or behavioral specialists and veterinarians is also recommended for those directly involved with animal care and handling.

1.4 Safety and Risk Management

Facilitators in AAI programs should be aware of all possible hazards that may be present for each population, setting and unique animal and human characteristic. They should be well informed and take appropriate measures to minimize the risks involved in the AAI. Examples of issues to be informed about include knowledge of allergies, effects of animals for very young or elderly people, people with low immune systems, possible results for working with people with open wounds with animals, zoonoses, trauma, participant animal abuse histories and possible dangerous materials in certain settings that animals can come into contact with. Facilitators should ensure that someone in the setting has first aid/CPR and be knowledgeable about basic animal first aid.

2. Animal Handlers

Persons who are handling animals in an AAI but are not facilitating the session should be experienced and competent in their role. These are people who may be involved in the diamond model of AAIs.

2.1 Knowledge, Experience and Training

Animal Handlers should have a sound understanding of the populations they are working with and understand the boundaries of what they are providing in assisting the animal to interact. They should receive training in AAI as well as cross training in how to ethically and effectively provide their animal in a session with a facilitator. They should practice humane and ethical animal training methods and seek consultation and further training from professionals in the field of animal behavior, AAI and animal health and wellness.

2.2 Thorough Understanding of Animal

Animal handlers are solely responsible for the animals and should have a positive relationship with them. They should be well versed in the preferences and requirements for the species as well as the breed of their animals. They should ascertain a firm understanding of the particular animal's scope of practice, abilities, needs, preferences, behavior, tolerance, stress and communication signals.

2.3 Care and Welfare of Animals

Animal Handlers should ensure their animals receive the best of care, regular health checks and are properly screened, behavior tested and certified to work in the populations they are engaging with. Handlers or animal stewards should protect the animal from being overwhelmed by choosing their settings and populations carefully, staying within the animal's scope of practice, as well as consistently monitoring their behavior and insisting on breaks or discontinuance of AAI sessions if the animal is exhibiting any signs of discomfort.

3. Participants

Participants are people who have been identified as possibly benefiting from an AAI. Depending on their histories and presenting issues, they may or may not actually benefit from working with or interacting with animals. This should be determined by the facilitator before they are introduced to animals and then monitored for any need to discontinue as the AAI progresses. All AAI sessions conducted with participants should be led by a facilitator skilled in all aspects of AAI.

3.1 Determining Suitability for AAI

In order to determine whether AAI will be a suitable intervention for participants, the facilitator should inquire about the participants' history with animal interactions, whether there is any history of animal abuse, whether there is a trauma background which may be triggered by possible animal interactions, fear of animals or if there are allergies to animals or immunity deficiencies.

3.2 Full Disclosure and Informed Consent

Participants should be fully informed of any risks and contra-indications associated with the AAI and their consent for undertaking an AAI should be attained before the AAI is to commence. Participants should be assured that their confidentiality will be maintained by all involved in the intervention. Participants should be informed that if they wish to discontinue the AAI at any time that it is their right to do so.

3.3 Informed Procedure and Safety

Participants should be informed of any attire necessary for their interactions in AAIs. Participants should provide consent for emergency medical care if necessary and be informed of any hygiene or preventative practices that they can implement to minimize their risks of illness or injury due to animal contact. All participants and possible attending caregivers should be informed about safety practices and briefed on proper animal handling techniques. Participants should be supervised at all times and any adverse reactions they may have to the AAI, whether it be physical, psychological or emotional should be dealt with immediately by the facilitator.

3.3 Designing and Monitoring AAI Goals

Participants of all ages and abilities can benefit from AAIs. Facilitators should ensure that the AAI matches the participant's abilities and comfort level. To determine best fit AAI for participants, facilitators should consult with the participant and any caregivers who may have valuable input. Participants' comfort levels around the animals should be monitored before and during the sessions. Clear goals should be implemented and AAI sessions should be designed accordingly.

4. Animals

The animals in AAIs are integral to the practice. They should be treated with utmost respect and cared for in ways that uphold the highest standards. Their psychological, physical, emotional and mental health and safety are paramount to successful AAIs and therefore, their proper care and welfare should be the focus for their companions and handlers.

4.1 Selection

When determining which animals should be working in AAIs, the facilitator or handler (sometimes the same person) should consult with animal behavior specialists, AAI specialists, trainers or knowledgeable veterinarians to decide which species and breed may be more suited to the kind of work they are pursuing. Certain species or breeds of animals are more content and better suited to certain populations, human characteristics and settings. Animals selected for AAIs should be vet screened and only accepted if healthy, young enough to work without a negative impact on their health, responsive, interactive and found to be of appropriate temperament and behavior once s/he has been screened and tested in conditions that are similar to the ones that s/he will be working in.

4.2 Suitability

Once an animal is selected for its work in AAI, the person responsible for the animal interactions during the AAIs should follow the guidelines set out by their local organizations which provide information, education and guidance for certifying an animal to work as an AAI co-counsellor. Animals generally require basic obedience and a temperament test to pass certification and to conduct their AAIs effectively. Animals in AAIs should have predictable, reliable and consistent behavior in a variety of conditions, be responsive to their handler, have a positive history and interactions with other animals that may be present during AAIs and have a positive health check and up to date vaccinations. The animal's suitability to the population and setting should be monitored and assessed on a regular basis for any changes that may hinder the safe and ethical practice of continuing the AAI.

4.3 Scope of Practice

Animal's working in AAI's should have their scope of practice recommended/defined by organizations / AAI professionals who are skilled in the screening, testing and certification of the animals. Scope of practice will encompass what types of populations of people and settings the animal prefers, is skilled in and will be the most successful in helping. Ensuring the animal continues to work within its scope of practice is the animal handler's responsibility and if the handler is changing his/her scope of professional practice then the animal will require screening and certification to change his/her scope of practice as well.

4.4 Care and Welfare

Animals in AAI benefit from having a consistent veterinarian; regular health checks, vaccines (if recommended by the vet for safety) and parasite treatments; medical record and health tracking forms; healthy, quality living conditions which are

appropriate to their needs in terms of sheltering from harsh elements, etc.; healthy diet and exercise plans; scheduled breaks, vacations and time off from work, especially when sick or injured; proper partnering with people in need to ensure the protection of their sensitivities; access to food, water and rest areas where they can be alone during work times; help to overcome their trauma if necessary and protection from contracting infectious diseases from humans. Grooming appropriate to the setting and population is necessary on a consistent basis. Animals' physical, psychological, emotional and mental health should not be compromised by their interactions with the humans they are serving. Please see Appendix B, IAHAIO White Paper for recommendations for the care and welfare of animals in AAIs.

4.5 Safety and Risk Management

Protecting animals from harmful experiences involves really understanding them and knowing their signs and signals of discomfort as well as ensuring facilitators are surveying the environments their animals are working in for any possible hazards or dangerous activities. Monitoring the animals for signs of change in their behavior or temperament requires that their handler is very familiar with them and is paramount to ensuring they are not encountering emotional overload or taking the necessary precautions if they are. Agreeing upon and upholding an appropriate timeframe of interaction in the AAI will help to prevent overload as will ensuring there is an appropriate ratio of people interacting with the animal at any given time. Being aware of any biases toward animals and their treatment as well as respecting when they are giving messages to take a break from activities will ensure safe AAI practice. Having space for them to rest or relax in before, during and after AAI sessions is recommended as is ensuring that the animals are debriefed after strenuous or stressful sessions. Comfortable and well-fitting equipment should always be used. Animals should not work outside their scope of practice with populations they are unfamiliar with or settings they have never been in before without testing, screening or training. Being aware of and respecting that some animals become unsuitable for this work and may need to be retired or that they will age out of this work and monitoring them for signs of a need for change in their schedules or workloads as they age will help to ensure that their needs are met safely and ethically.

5. Program Considerations

When conducting AAIs, plans for how to do so safely, ethically and effectively should be developed before the AAI is carried out. Developing standards for the AAI practice and policies are recommended to ensure each member in the AAI understands their roles and responsibilities and ensuring all other checks and balances are in place will allow for an effective AAI.

5.1 Definition of Roles and Responsibilities

Each member in the AAI as well as those involved in the facilities or programs that may be receiving the AAIs have different roles and responsibilities. Having these clearly stated in writing and ensuring anyone involved in the interactions is informed about their responsibilities is recommended.

5.2 Policies and Procedures

Having policies developed; a list of procedures for the AAI implementation and check lists for things to bring, ask and be aware of will help everyone involved in the AAI to be prepared and to understand what to do in any possible situation. Policies and procedures might include how animals will be transported safely; what to do in the event of an accident on the way to a visit; how and to whom to report incidents with the animals; what to do in the case of a fire while at a facility; job descriptions of the facilitators, animal handlers and volunteers and much more. Check lists might include all the animal's supplies and necessities and all equipment necessary for the AAI as well as reminders to ask where it is appropriate for the animal to eliminate, who will clean up after the animal, where waste might be disposed of on a visit, who is in charge in the facility and much more. Developing the necessities of the program in writing will help to ensure that the AAI is an effective, safe and ethical intervention.

5.3 Protections: Insurances, Waivers and Government Checks

To work with animals in interventions, it is recommended to have the proper insurances in place to cover any unexpected mishaps within the intervention. When professionals are facilitating the AAI, they generally have professional liability insurance to cover their professional work. It is often necessary to have extended coverage when involving animals in practice. Determining whether the facilitator or the facility receiving the service will provide the insurance for the AAI is necessary. Providing a waiver to participants is recommended to ensure they are providing their fully informed consent for participation in an AAI. The waiver should provide details of the AAI and require the signature of the participant or guardians of minors. If anyone on the AAI team will be working with vulnerable populations or minors, they should be required to provide a clean child welfare and criminal record check from their local police or social services departments. Child welfare checks are free in most provinces as are criminal record checks for people serving in a volunteer capacity.

5.4 Identifying Goals and Measuring Progress

Due to AAI being relatively new in Canada and requiring much support for recognition as a therapeutic medium, it is helpful to the field to identify the goals of the AAI and to evaluate whether or not they are being met within the medium. Sometimes AAI is a visitation where goals are less formal and may not be being measured or evaluated, but in all other situations, it is recommended that the facilitators work diligently to identify specific areas they are attempting to provide intervention for and documenting whether there was any progress in these areas.

5.5 Mentoring and Supervising

As an extended contribution to the field of AAI in Canada, those highly skilled in AAI should consider providing mentoring and supervision to people just entering the field to ensure best practice, acknowledgement and adherence to these voluntary guidelines and the ongoing safe and ethical practice of AAI nationwide. Those just entering the field should seek certification in AAI as well as supervision and mentorship.

Anyone interested in learning more about the practices of AAI or being involved in its development in our country, please contact Eileen Bona at 780-809-1047 ext. 2

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