

GLACLP Article Review: “Play and Pets: The Physical and Emotional Impact of Child-Life and Pet Therapy on Hospitalized Children”

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Child life specialists know the importance of normalization for children who are in the hospital. One of the ways that child life specialists provide this normalization is through facility dogs and pet therapy. Many families have pets at home and being separated from these pets can be a significant stressor for children who are visiting the hospital for both short and long term stays. Pets can provide comfort for children and remind them of their beloved furry friends that are not at home. Spending time with animals can also provide a distraction for patients during their hospital stay and give them an activity to participate in.

“Play and Pets: The Physical and Emotional Impact of Child-Life and Pet Therapy on Hospitalized Children” by Kaminski, Pellino and Wish (2002) researched children’s moods before and after pet therapy sessions and play sessions with a child life specialist. Researchers explained that previous research has supported that pet-facilitated therapy can “promote social interactions, increase emotional comfort, decrease loneliness and anxiety and provide a sense of self-esteem and independence” (p.322). These benefits are important goals of most child life programs which are why pet therapy is often set up and run by the child life department. Kaminski et al asked a couple of research questions in this study. They looked at patients’ and parents’ perceptions of the child’s moods before and after a session of child life play time or pet therapy. Researchers also studied the percentage of positive, negative or neutral emotions that were displayed and measured physiological indicators of stress.

70 patients participated in this research study; 40 were in the child life playroom group and 30 were in the pet therapy group. Mood was measured by patient report, parents report and a clinical assessment. Physiological indicators of stress that were measured were salivary cortisol, heart rate and blood pressure. The results were that patients experienced an increase in positive mood after both the child life playroom session and also after pet therapy. The increase in positive mood that was found after participating in pet therapy was statistically significant. The patients’ comments were also recorded and assessed. There were fewer comments about wanting to go home or being sick after both forms of therapy; the child life play session and the pet therapy.

This research supports what many child life specialists have seen in their practice, play sessions and time spent with animals helps children cope with their hospitalization and separation from home and routines. This article encouraged that health care providers apply the findings to their practice by taking the time to assess the importance of pets for a patient and learn their patients’ favorite play activities. Child life specialists are the health care professionals that focus on providing this assessment and adapting psychosocial services in response to the child’s personality and treatment goals. For professionals who are advocating for the creation of

pet therapy at their facility or expanding the child life department, this research supports the essential role that both child life play sessions and sponsored pet therapy plays in a patient's mood and coping during hospitalization. Parents' coping is also improved through these services because they felt less guilt being away from their children and they recognize that their children's moods are being improved.

Kaminski, M., Pellino, T., & Wish, J. (2002). Play and Pets: The Physical and Emotional Impact of Child-Life and Pet Therapy on Hospitalized Children. *Children's Health Care*, 31(4), 321-335.