

Successful Strategies for Programs Engaging in Human-Animal Interaction with At-Risk Youth



This study looks at best practices and strategies for community programs that use human-animal interaction as an intervention for at-risk youth.

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Introduction

Organizations that use Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) as an intervention in jail facilities, with individuals with disabilities, and in healthcare facilities are commonly researched, however, there is little research available on organizations that work specifically with the at-risk youth population. The implementation and recording of community programs is still relatively new; several studies have concluded that these programs impact convicts (Cooke & Farrington, 2016). Positive psychological and social behavior consequences have been concluded by certain researchers (Fournier et al., 2007; Garrity et al., 1987; Hecht et al., 2001). Furthermore, HAI has been shown to have favorable psychological benefits in psychiatric hospitals and nursing homes (Fournier et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2002). Dog therapy programs for convicts, like other HAI, resulted in greater self-esteem and self-efficacy (Cooke & Farrington, 2016; Gilger, 2007; Strimple, 2003).

Methodology

The researcher used a phenomenological approach for this study. Four research questions were selected. The researcher compiled 14 interview questions to gather answers to the research questions. A method of purposeful sampling is congruent with qualitative research. A sample of 25 people was selected as a sample from a population of program directors, executive directors, educational directors, or board members of community programs that interact with dogs and at-risk adolescents in a humane education and dog training program. The intended target of 15 people was interviewed.

The 15 participants represented non-profit groups working with children and canines in the United States. There were 13 females and two males among the participants.

Results

Based on a phenomenological study, with 4 research questions and 15 interview questions, the PESA (Planning, Education, Safety, and Assessment) model (Sly, 2021) was created to help organizers focus on the essentials when starting a program.

Planning

When planning, three components should be prioritized: (a) defining goals, (b) practicing clear and transparent communication, and (c) obtaining buy-in from all potential partners. Identifying your program's goal is critical during the planning process. This will restrict your field of vision. Establishing goals allows you to create and communicate your mission and vision to others, resulting in buy-in.

Education

Consider (a) training and trainers, (b) obtaining a mentor from a similar program, and (c) conducting research. Training and well-trained personnel will be critical to the program's success. Working with children and canines entails a great deal of risk and liability. Working with a mentor or volunteer for a comparable structured program is beneficial. Another aspect is to conduct research. Examine best practices, different types of HAI programs, and the population you plan to serve.

Safety

For adolescents and canines, safety emphasizes (a) training and (b) gaining access and working with professionals and consultants. Training is essential for safety. Handlers, participants, children, and canines must be safe. As a result, safe handling measures are required. Several participants provided accounts regarding situations in which adolescents were experiencing trauma or shared a distressing experience with the group and were unprepared to handle the situation. The presence of licensed psychologists, clinicians, or other trained professionals who interact with youth is critical in resolving many of the difficulties that develop during a program. Having a licensed dog trainer or dog behaviorist to ensure the safety of both the youngsters and the dogs was one way to address the safety issues that arose.

Assessment

The assessment aspect focuses on (a) gathering feedback from stakeholders and (b) demonstrating benefits using a data-driven measurement instrument. Participants were asked how they measure program performance. Youth participants, as well as employees and volunteers, provided feedback. The feedback examined participant perceptions of the programs. Furthermore, obtaining input from employees and volunteers concerning actions inside and outside the program is critical.

Conclusion

The PESA Model for Community Programs provides a framework for present or future community programs and non-profit organizers to launch HAI interventions or programs with at-risk kids successfully.