

Animal assisted therapy as a resource for intervention with children and adolescents victims of sexual abuse.

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While in Spain we do not have recent statistics on child sexual abuse, the figures provided by studies conducted in Spain, USA and Canada are sadly alarming. It is estimated that 23% - 25% of girls and 10% -15% of boys are sexually abused before age 17. This affects all cultures and social strata, according to the European Council, 7 out of 10 cases, the abuse is committed by a person related to the child and whom the child place his trust.

Council of Europe campaign
to stop sexual violence
against children



Campaña del **Consejo de Europa**
contra la violencia sexual
sobre niños, niñas y adolescentes

**uno de
cada cinco**

Despite the concern of the problem, there is little social awareness on this matter and society's belief prevails that sexual abuse in childhood don't happen so often, and if it does, it takes place in areas far from their reality. Sexual abuse in childhood is an invisible phenomenon because it breaks with three myths in society, family, gender and childhood.

Moreover, few resources are directed towards prevention and intervention in these cases, as well as study on its incidence and prevalence in the general population. Some of the measures necessary for a comprehensive approach to the problem of child sexual abuse:

- Involvement of public institutions - visibility of the problem
- Developing child abuse awareness campaigns among the population
- Specific training for professionals
- Collaboration of educational, social and health institutions in a coordinated way for detection, intervention and referral.

UNICEF campaign for social awareness about child sexual abuse:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcErndHiAI4>

Consequences for child sexual abuse victims

At least 80% of victims suffer negative psychological consequences. The scope of the psychological impact will depend on the degree of child culpability by parents, as well as coping strategies available to the victim. In general, girls tend to have anxious-depressive reactions; boys, school failure and nonspecific socialization as well as difficulties and aggressive sexual behavior. Echeburúa, E. and P. de Corral (2006).

There are studies examining the effects of sexual abuse in the short and long term, these are grouped into emotional, physical, behavioral, social symptoms and sexual sphere. The evolution of these consequences will depend largely on factors such as the type of abused, participation in specific therapeutic interventions programs.



Background on animals participation for therapeutic purposes with children and adolescents.

The first reference to the clinical use of animals in therapy contexts is Boris M. Levinson, an American child therapist credited with being the father of animal assisted therapy. In 1953, Levinson accidentally observed the effect of his dog Jingles with one of his patients with serious withdrawal, causing greater openness and disinhibition in the therapy context. He is the author of the reference manual "Pet-Oriented Child Psychotherapy" published in 1969 and he defined in which functions the therapeutic incorporation of animals with children and adolescents can be useful:

- ❖ As a transitional object.
- ❖ As a source of physical contact, affection and unconditional acceptance.
- ❖ As a way to have a framework in which the child masters the situation and feel relaxed.

Levinson made significant methodological contributions to the systematic and structured pets employment in child psychotherapy as well as the incorporation of pets in child clinical evaluation. He established the pathology indicative signs through the behavior and the interaction patient-animal.

"The more we can observe the patient interacting with a pet, the deeper will be the conclusions that we draw." Boris M. Levinson.

The institution Green Chimneys is another of key references in animal assisted intervention aimed at children and adolescents. It is a farm located near New York and founded by Dr. Samuel Ross in 1947. Considered one of the best expert organizations in Animal Assisted Therapy and Education worldwide, Green Chimneys is specializes in the care of children and adolescents with emotional and behavioral problems. The animals involved as co-therapists are diverse, dogs, horses and other animals present in the farm,

working with a large multidisciplinary team for the rehabilitation of children and adolescents with severe psychological disorders.

Currently there are many animal assisted therapy organizations worldwide involved with child victims of sexual abuse, incorporating mostly dogs, horses and farm animals as co-therapist, which we address next some examples:

- [Forget me not farm](#)
- [Courthouse dogs foundation](#)
- [American Humane](#)

With regard to analysis and research works developed to evaluate the effectiveness of incorporating animals in therapeutic environments with child victims of sexual abuse, although still very limited, studies are increasing and giving good results:

- To date, studies carried out suggest that animal assisted therapy can improve feelings of anxiety, depression, anguish and hopelessness, while reducing the frequency of nightmares, intrapersonal distress feelings and thoughts of self-harm (Eggiman, 2006 ; Ewing et al, 2007).
- With survivors of sexual abuse, animals can serve as a means of safety or support, furthermore, bond with animals helps to reduce anger and abusive behavior with others in the future. Barker (1999).
- The animal assisted therapy applied in forensic interviews with children and adolescents victims of sexual abuse, helps to reduce physiological responses of anxiety, heart rate and salivary amylase levels Alpha and inmmuglobin. Krause-Parello, Cheryl A.; Friedmann, Erika (2014).
- Children physical contact with animals has shown to have a physiological impact on heart rate and blood pressure, functions controlled by lower levels of the brain, where the effect of trauma is stored. Friedmann & Tsai (2006).
- The animal assisted therapy can reduce externalizing behavior problems observed in victims of sexual abuse in childhood, including attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity, oppositional defiant disorder and conduct problems. Eggiman, 2006; Ewing et al, 2007; Shultz (2005).
- Other studies concerning horse assisted psychotherapy found improvements in several areas, including advances in psychological, social and educational function. Schultz et al. (2007).

Which are the reasons for introducing animals in therapy with children and adolescents victims of sexual abuse?

“Animal Assisted Therapy 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, and within the scope of practice of his/her profession”. (Delta Society)

While the benefits of incorporating animals in the intervention with children and adolescents in vulnerable situations are multiple, we show below some of the main objectives pursued with this kind of intervention, in the case of children victims of sexual abuse:

To provide a safe therapeutic environment for the child, a climate of acceptance and trust that encourages adherence to the intervention. Especially in the case of victims of sexual abuse in childhood, it is necessary to create therapeutic environments in which patients feel secure and confident when they are sharing their experiences and expressing their emotions. The animals in contexts of therapy are able to generate a non threatening atmosphere in which the patient does not feel judged and he is accepted as he is. Given the ability of animals to establish links and to correspond to affection, animals incorporate added value of warmth and welcome to the patient.

Encouraging emotional expression. The animal can be seen by the child as a model, a mirror or a teacher. Precisely because the animal does not judge, he may promote self-esteem and the expression of emotions. Piaget found that children go through a stage of development where it is natural to provide humane treatment to animals. Children sometimes project feelings about themselves in the animal that gives love, does not judge and provides stable and unconditional affection.

In order to enhance child's feelings visibility and identification, it may be beneficial to the therapeutic process, storytelling with the animal and to incorporate the animal in therapeutic play activities.

To facilitate the establishment of the therapeutic alliance between patient and therapist. The animal bridges between therapist and child and he can be constituted as a transitional object, in other words, the child expresses his emotions more easily through the animal. Sometimes the therapist is not capable of expressing sympathy to the child directly, while the animal displays relatively few reservations in this regard. As an example, the therapy dog will establish close contact, resting its head on the lap child. (Lefkowitz et al., 2005; Reichert et al., 1998).

To reduce levels of stress, anxiety in children. Studies have shown that the animal presence, even the animal observation can cushion the psychological and physiological responses to stress and anxiety, lowering blood pressure and heart rate. (Cirulli et al, 2011;. Barker et al., 2003; Berget et al, 2011;. Lefkowitz et al., 2005; Eggiman, 2006; Friedmann et al., 1983; Grandgeroge et al., 2011).

To defocalize the attention of the therapy goals. Often the therapy situation itself, can be a highly stressful factor and generates anxiety in the child or adolescent. The animal helps the therapy situation to pass into the background, bonding and interaction activities with the animal gain prominence.

Encouraging emotional self-regulation. The animal may be in itself a powerful resource helping to control one's emotions child or adolescents. Animal therapy is calm, predictable and sensitive to the patient level control impulse, so that it can provide good feedback regarding the degree of self-control shown by the patient. Moreover, dynamic and therapeutic exercises can be developed which aim the child/adolescent to be able to detect the emotions associated with impulsive responses or loss of control, as well as to establish appropriate cognitive strategies in order to self-regulate his responses.

While animal assisted therapy may constitute a valid alternative intervention, complementary to other, usually conducted with victims of sexual abuse in childhood, there are contraindications to be taken into account:

- The child has a history of animal abuse
- The child is scared of animals
- The child tends to provoke the animal
- Allergies

Finally, according to intervention and research references shown, the need to further explore the therapeutic contributions that animals can pose at different stages of intervention with survivors of sexual abuse in childhood is evident. The data so far are encouraging and the growing interest of institutions and professionals, bodes that animal assisted therapy will be constituted as a real alternative intervention with these patients.



**NO al abuso
sexual infantil!**

**Detenerlo es tarea
de TODOS!!**