Can dogs help children with Autism learn?

Photography by Trisha Harris

Researchers from the University of Texas – Austin and the Austin Dog Alliance are using dogs to measure social skill improvement in children. In a study currently underway, children with autism are attending the first in a series of social-skill classes with specially trained therapy dogs that researchers hope will determine whether animals can improve the kids' ability to stay engaged and learn life skills.

Results of the University of Texas Autism Project (UTAP) study could be vitally important as autism reaches epidemic proportions. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects on average 1 in 110 – or 750,000 – children in the U.S. A neurological disorder and developmental disability, ASD symptoms include impairment in communication skills, social interactions, and restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior.

The study will measure whether children with ASD engaged in learning about and with dogs can calm repetitive and other distracting behaviors and increase attentiveness and ability to learn social skills more easily.

The UTAP is documenting how children on the spectrum behave in the dog-assisted classroom by filming two K9 Club – Autism Project classes conducted by the Austin Dog Alliance in north Austin. The classes, one for ages 8 to 10, one for ages 11 to 15, each include five kids and up to four therapy dogs, dog trainers and autism specialists.

"The K9 Club – Autism Project classes are highly structured, with time for a speaker, social-skill lessons, physical activity, craft projects and dog training," says Debi Krakar, ADA Executive Director. "We have a theme each day. For example, if our speaker talks about dog nutrition and choosing good dog food, we have a human theme about eating right. If we talk about dog body language in the lesson, we also talk about human body language."
The researchers study the children's physical actions to determine if the dogs are helping keep the children engaged. They want to see if activities such as stroking the dog might reduce a child's repetitive behavior or encourage them to sit through a speaker's talk. Can helping train a dog keep a child's focus throughout the activity? And do these children, who often avoid social interaction with others, want to return and continue the program so that they can practice social skills in a supportive and fun group setting?

If funding continues, Jensen hopes to resume this research effort with two follow-up class series, one studying typically developing children and a final series using both typically developing children and children with ASD in the same classroom. Completing all three studies would give researchers a basis of comparison that could lead to the best analysis of how effective the child-dog training can be.