

UT-Austin Autism Study Uses Dogs to Measure Social Skill Improvement in Children

UT-Austin and Austin Dog Alliance hope to learn if dogs can improve the ability of children with autism to concentrate and learn life skills

December 5, 2011 – AUSTIN, TX – Can dogs help children with autism learn? Researchers from the University of Texas – Austin and the Austin Dog Alliance are trying to find out. 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.

“Parents of kids on the spectrum are looking for opportunities and acceptance for their children outside the home or school,” says Dr. Jody Jensen, Director of Research for the Autism Project and a Professor in the UT Department of Kinesiology and Health. “They wonder, ‘Can I take my child to a movie or a restaurant?’”

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?

Parents also report on any changes they see in their children.

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Laurie Scott says the Austin Dog Alliance's K9 Club classes provide an accepting social network for her teen-age son, Martin, who was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder at age three and is now in 7th grade.

"Martin, loves going to K9 Club classes," said Scott, "and he's asked when he can go back. When dogs are at the center of any learning experience, he's engaged and excited about participating. The impact on Martin and my new vision of possibilities for my son has been nothing short of a miracle."

Next steps? 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.

For Martin and children like him, it's hoped that these very special dogs can make a life-long difference.

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About Austin Dog Alliance

Located in Austin, Texas, Austin Dog Alliance, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, is the only organization in Texas providing group social skill development programs for children with autism spectrum disorder that incorporate the use of canine assisted therapy. These special dogs are registered pet partners with the Delta Society – the internationally recognized gold standard for therapy dog training – that have received additional training through Austin Dog Alliance to work with children on the spectrum. Austin Dog Alliance also provides Delta Society registered handler-dog teams to local hospitals, rehabilitation centers, nursing homes, as well as schools and libraries through its Bow Wow Reading Dog program.

Austin Dog Alliance was created to provide an accepting and supportive environment where dogs and humans can improve health and wellbeing. Human-dog training classes provide a solid financial foundation to support the Training and Office Facility, donations and fundraising events are used to sustain and grow community outreach programs such as Autism enrichment, dog therapy services, Bow Wow Reading Dog, rescue and youth programs.

For more information, visit <http://austindogalliance.org/>

About the University of Texas Autism Project (UTAP)

The purpose of University of Texas Autism Project (UTAP) is to provide a center of excellence for services, knowledge, and best practices related to living, and working, with children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). UTAP is an initiative of the Kinesiology and Health Education Department in the College of Education.

For more information, visit <http://www.edb.utexas.edu/tap/>