



European Society for Animal Assisted Therapy
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Definition of animal-assisted therapy

Numerous terms are actively used in the areas of therapy, pedagogy, care and social work with animals – both amongst the various professions using animal assistance and with others – considerably complicating mutual understanding. This fragmentation of terminologies also stands in the way of its recognition as a professional field.

The European Society of Animal-Assisted Therapy (ESAAT) therefore agreed on the following definition of animal-assisted therapy at its General Assembly in Vienna on 17.9.2011.

Introduction

As a Europe-wide institution, the European Society of Animal-Assisted Therapy (ESAAT) must orient itself on internationally recognised classification systems. With the International Classification of Functions (ICF), the World Health Organisation (WHO) has created an instrument that provides a language and a framework for describing states of health and states connected with health in a uniform and standardised form. It defines components of health and some components of wellbeing connected with health (e.g. education/training and work).

The WHO's international classification of functionality, disability and health has been the basis for therapeutic and pedagogic processes in many fields for some years now. It gives therapy a higher-ranking definition. Therapy as defined by the ICF includes the meanings of "therapy", "support", "training", "rehabilitation" as well as the "initiation of learning processes".

The term "animal-assisted therapy" has been exploited for the therapeutic and pedagogic use of animals for many years. It therefore appears sensible to use this term as a generic term including all animal-assisted measures (e.g. animal-assisted interaction, animal-assisted education, animal-assisted support, and animal-assisted interventions). Therapy is comprehensively understood here in the sense of a professional helper relationship that influences humans. The term therefore also includes preventive and supportive measures.

The occasional attempts to achieve a strict delimitation of the various terms and their fragmentation lead to enormous problems in practice. The ESAAT considers this one reason for the hitherto low recognition of animal-assisted therapy by political decision-makers.

The differentiations carried out by the Delta Society in the past are, in practice, not very productive for Europe. ESAAT considers the definition of “animal-assisted activity” unnecessary because no qualified services are involved.

The ESAAT believes that a uniform, immediately understandable, term should be used in order to be able to achieve a professional profile in the longer term. The definition of terms is one of the original tasks of the ESAAT, which considers itself to be a “professional community” that defines training criteria and professional rules whilst guaranteeing that they are monitored.

It is therefore recommended that, in future, the adjective “animal-assisted” (e.g. animal-assisted therapeutic pedagogy) is no longer used in a general sense but only in the term “animal-assisted therapy”, e.g. “animal-assisted therapy in therapeutic pedagogy” or “animal-assisted therapy in social work”.

The Definition: Animal-assisted therapy

“Animal-assisted therapy” includes deliberately planned pedagogic, psychological and socially integrative interventions with animals for children, youths, adults and senior citizens with cognitive, social-emotional and motoric disabilities, and behavioural problems, and for focused support. It also includes health-promoting, preventive and rehabilitative measures.

Animal-assisted therapy takes place individually and within a group setting.

Animal-assisted therapy is based on the relationship and process structure within a triangular relationship between the client, animal and therapist. Animal-assisted therapy involves methods by which clients interact with animals, communicate via animals or are active for animals. Implementation is goal-oriented and based on a clear process and topic orientation taking into account animal-ethical principles with subsequent documentation and professional well-founded considerations.

The general goals of animal-assisted therapy are:

1. the restoration and maintenance of physical, cognitive and emotional functions,
2. the support of capabilities and skills by carrying out activities and treatments,
3. the support of inclusiveness in the particular life situation, and
4. the improvement of subjective wellbeing.

This is intended to result in individuals being able to act and participate in differing spheres of life to the best of their abilities.

The specific aims of an animal-assisted therapy are based on the diagnosis regarding the needs, resources, disorders and need for assistance of the particular client.

Animal-assisted therapy is closely related to other applied scientific disciplines such as psychotherapy, psychology, medicine, education, ethology and veterinary medicine.

Animal-assisted therapy is carried out by a specialist with professional training in animal-assisted therapy and continuous further training. Only courses that meet the criteria of the ESAAT, are ESAAT-

accredited, and consist of at least 60 ECTS, count as professional training. Depending on the animal species used, it is necessary to undergo further animal-specific training that corresponds, at least, to ESAAT's basic training. Continuous subject-specific further training in animal-assisted therapy must consist of at least 16 hours every two years.

The task of the "specialist in animal-assisted therapy" is to employ an animal or a team of therapy-accompanying animals to support humans in their need for relief of their complaints, as well as in their autonomy and personal and social integration. They do this within their fundamental professional field or with the involvement of other specialists. The involvement of other specialists takes place according to the field of activity, with occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists, (social) pedagogues, etc. The specialist plans the measures on the basis of the most varied of concepts and approaches for differing target groups, carries them out in a goal-oriented manner, and maintains documentation on them. The interventions of specialists – based on the triangular relationship between the therapist, the animal and the client – must be structured in a process- and topic-oriented manner and scrutinised with professional, well-founded consideration. Whereby the specialist also considers the social situation and other specialists involved whilst working out the goal orientation and considering the course of treatment for individual clients.