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# ”It’s the Journey”: Images of Therapy Dogs by Children Healing from Trauma and Homelessness

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## Abstract

Over 2.5 million children under age eighteen are considered to be part of chronically homeless families in the United States. Child homelessness correlates with a wide range of challenges beyond a lack of stable housing; these include poor school performance, juvenile justice involvement, and higher rates of physical and mental health challenges. Moreover, child homelessness is highly correlated with experiences of interpersonal violence and trauma, while engagement in trauma therapy tends to be low among this population. The challenges facing this population are significant, but a recent pilot study suggests that canine assisted therapy presents a novel approach to engaging homeless children in mental health treatment. The study integrated analysis of projective drawings (to be included on the poster) and accompanying narratives with the treatment records of 11 children (ages 6-11) who received canine assisted therapy while residing in an urban American homeless shelter. All children worked with a clinician trained in Animal Assisted Play Therapy™ and participated in at least three therapy sessions with a dog present. Each child created a drawing in response to the prompt: ”Draw a picture of a child and a dog”, and told a story based on the contents of their drawing. Parent/caregivers of each child participated in a qualitative interview that elicited feedback and reflections on the therapy process. Investigators used grounded theory and interpretive description to conduct both individual and cross-participant analysis.

Each child personalized their drawing, either by identifying the protagonist as their gender, or including a physical characteristic (e.g. clothing, hairstyle) unique to the child; this suggests that the children tapped into their personal experience. Several themes emerged from analysis of the drawings and narratives including attachment bonds and mastery of new tasks. Children depicted close relationships between the characters in their drawings and, in their narratives, described the children and dogs as central in one another’s lives. Children also highlighted the importance of learning tasks related to training and caring for the dogs. These themes were reflected in the children’s treatment records and the parent/caregiver interviews. Parent/caregivers described their child’s experience in therapy as a positive experience, and identified the therapy dog as a component of the treatment’s success.

Through the medium of projective drawings, children communicate their experiences in a developmentally appropriate manner. The themes that emerged from this study inform further research on the specific benefits of animal assisted therapy. The images created during this study are a valuable tool in understanding the experiences of homeless children, and lay the groundwork for further study of the use of projective drawings for exploring children’s experiences in therapy.

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**Keywords:** Homelessness, trauma therapy, PTSD, therapy dogs, projective drawings