

Animal and Pet Therapies for Autism

Research shows significant benefits from animal-assisted therapy

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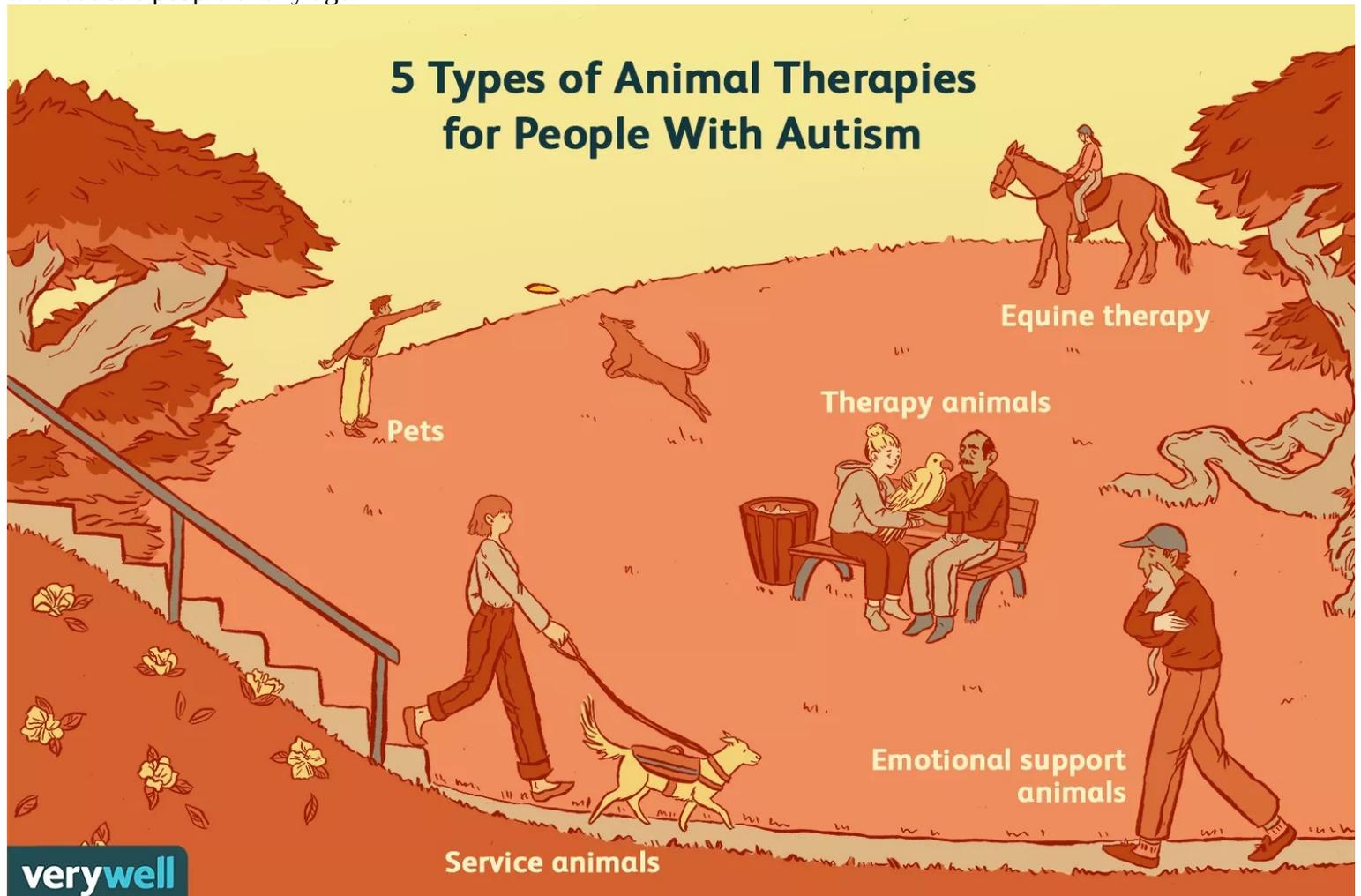
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There is no cure for autism. There are, however, many therapies that can help treat either core or co-morbid (related) symptoms. While some of these therapies are risky, expensive, or both, animal-assisted and pet therapies are risk-free and either low cost or free. Even better, people with autism who are comfortable with and supported by animals are not alone. By becoming animal lovers, they have joined the ranks of millions of other people who share their passion and interest. This, for many autistic people, is a significant benefit—finding a group with a shared interest can be life-changing.

Studies on autism and animals are almost universally positive. While pets, service dogs, and animal-assisted therapies won't cure autism, they do help people with autism to cope with anxiety, engage more fully with other people, and even build communication skills. One study suggested that autistic people smile a lot more when they're around animals.

Types of Animal Therapies

Any kind of animal can provide emotional, physical, or social support; in general, however, mammals make better therapeutic animals than reptiles, birds, or amphibians. Fish can be calming, but can't provide the kind of interactions that build skills. No matter which type of animal is chosen, however, there are five ways in which animals can work with autistic people of any age.



Animal therapy for autism

Illustration by Brianna Gilmartin, Verywell

Service animals: Service animals are almost always dogs, and certain breeds are most commonly selected to be trained for service. Service animals work with children or adults with autism to help them navigate physical space, avoid negative interactions, or calm their emotions. Because they are highly trained "professionals," service animals can be costly—but there are many sources of funding available.

Therapy animals: Therapy animals may be any species; cats, dogs, Guinea pigs, parrots, horses, and many other animals can help people with autism to build social communication skills, manage their emotions, and (for children) build play skills. Therapy animals are also used to support positive social interactions with typical peers.

Emotional support animals: Emotional support animals are often pets. They are animals that make it easier for an autistic person to manage stressful situations such as travel, school, or medical interventions. Typically, emotional support animals must be certified by a clinician in order to be allowed into settings (such as schools) where animals are rarely allowed.

Pets: For many people with autism, pets provide a unique type of social bond that's available through no other means. Research supports the theory that pets promote "prosocial" behaviors such as shared interactions and shared smiles. The arrival of a pet is, according to one study, an especially beneficial moment.

Hippotherapy (equine therapy): While hippotherapy is a form of animal therapy, it is unique in several ways. Not only has it been studied more intensively than other forms of animal therapy, but it can support both physical and social/emotional skills. In addition, of course, becoming a skilled horseback rider has many other long-term social and physical benefits.

It's important to note that one form of animal therapy—interaction with dolphins—has been studied and found to be helpful. Unfortunately, while people with autism may have a positive experience with dolphins, the dolphins themselves are overly stressed by the experience. This has led to some negative outcomes both for the autistic individuals and for the dolphins. In addition, dolphin interactions are expensive and almost impossible to continue over time; it's tough to bond with an animal that lives in the ocean!

Service Dogs

Trained service and therapy animals are usually owned by the individual with autism. While they are expensive (because of their special training), they are often available through nonprofits that cover the majority of the cost. Service dogs are allowed in virtually any public setting.

Autistic people working with service dogs must be able to communicate with and control the dog, which means service dogs are not appropriate for every person on the spectrum. Depending on the circumstances, here are some of the things a service dog might do for its autistic human owner:

- Recognize emotional upset and help calm the owner

- Stop the owner from self-harming or potentially harming others

- Reduce anxiety by lying across the owner's lap and applying pressure

- Improve sleep

- Protect autistic people who are likely to elope (wander) or otherwise step into the way of danger

- Recognizing and responding to seizures or other co-morbid symptoms

There is limited research into the efficacy of service dogs for autistic children or adults; in one study, parents noted positive impacts both for their child and for themselves.

Therapy Animals

Therapy animals are animals of any species that are brought into a therapeutic setting, school, hospital, or office.

Therapy animals can be cats, dogs, birds, or even rodents. Therapy animals are often calming to people with autism and can help those individuals become more emotionally and intellectually available for therapy. They can also:

- Provide a focus for social communication

- Help build important skills such as joint attention and emotional reciprocity

- Support play therapy and other approaches to building social communication skills

- Provide motivation for learning a range of behavioral and practical skills

Help people with autism by providing physical outlets to calm sensory cravings and emotional anxiety, thus helping to make people more open to therapeutic experiences such as social coaching.

One study evaluated the impact of animal-assisted play therapy (AAPT) on a boy with autism; the findings were encouraging. Findings from a randomized study in which animals were involved in behavioral therapy found "significant improvement in social communication skills in children with ASD participating in AAT compared to children with ASD not receiving AAT."

Emotional Support Animals

Studies find that autistic people who have pets and/or emotional support animals gain in measurable ways from the experience. No matter what the species, pets can:

Provide an easy, always-available self-calming mechanism

Help smooth social communication

By lowering anxiety, help autistic people to access challenging locations such as airports, lecture halls, large restaurants, etc.

Emotional support animals are essentially pets that provide comfort and have been certified by a professional as being necessary to the emotional well-being of the owner. Such certifications can come from a doctor, therapist, or other professional. With the right documentation, emotional support animals are usually allowed to accompany their owners—though there are some limits, depending on the size and temperament of the animal.

Best Pet Dog for a Child With Autism

A large study used well-established metrics to evaluate the impacts of pets on children with autism. This study found significant gains in two specific areas of social/ communication: "offering to share" and "offering comfort," noting that "these two items reflect prosocial behaviors." They also found that the impacts were most significant when the pet arrived when the child was old enough to recognize the event.

Hippotherapy

Hippotherapy (sometimes called equestrian therapy) is therapeutic horseback riding and horse care. Hippotherapy is a well-established technique and is often paid for by insurance companies. While some people with autism find horses intimidating, those who do enjoy the experience can gain a great deal through hippotherapy.

Sitting on horseback can help build physical strength and tone muscles; this is important as many people with autism have low muscle tone.

Guiding and communicating with a horse can help to build social communication skills. The autistic person must think through and communicate their desires, a major step for many autistic children.

As they build skill, autistic people can participate in more advanced forms of horseback riding. Depending on their interests, some become involved in trail riding, dressage, and horse care.

Surprisingly, hippotherapy actually has a positive impact on autistic individuals' social understanding use of spoken language. One study found significant improvements in social cognition, social communication, total number of words, and new words spoken. Another study found a longterm reduction in "irritability behavior" as a result of hippotherapy.

Service Dogs By Warren Retrievers

<https://www.sdwr.org/service-dogs/autism/>