Canine Assisted Intervention and ADHD-Potential Mechanisms of Action for Improving Executive Function Skills; Main Outcomes from Project P.A.C.K.

Guest Lecture by Sabrina Elayne Brierley Schuck
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Abstract: This talk will review main outcome results from a recently completed randomized clinical trial examining traditional social skills training strategies assisted by certified therapy dogs in a therapeutic classroom setting. It will also address potential mechanisms of action thought to be active in improving skills of executive function, empathy, and social engagement. Children with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are at greater risk for school failure, functional impairment and poor life outcomes. Novel approaches aimed to manage symptoms and improve social skills are indicated. Project Positive, Assertive, Cooperative Kids (P.A.C.K.) is the first randomized clinical trial examining the safety and efficacy of Canine Assisted Interventions (CAI) for ADHD. 81 children with ADHD (mean age = 8.14, 58 males) and their parents participated in a 12-week after-school based skills training, either with or without therapy dogs (n=41 ‘DOG’, n=40 ‘NO-DOG’). Parents completed the ADHD-IV Rating Scale (DuPaul et al., 1998) every two weeks and the Social Skills Improvement System (Gresham & Elliott, 2008) at pretreatment, posttreatment, and follow-up. Inattention symptoms were lower for DOG than No-DOG at week-4 (F(1,274) = 4.58, p < .05) and remained lower across subsequent weeks (p < .05). Social Skills scores were better for DOG than No-DOG at posttreatment (F(1,80)= 4.45, p < .05) and follow-up (F(1,80)= 5.20, p < .05). While Problem Behaviors were reduced at post-treatment for both groups, scores declined at a faster rate for DOG than No-DOG (F(1,80)= 9.36, p < .01). CAI for children with ADHD is a safe and effective therapy for reducing symptoms, particularly inattention, and improving social skills. Investigation into underlying mechanisms and generalizability across settings and to other populations is warranted.

Bio: Dr. Schuck’s research interests center around the biological and socio-cultural mechanisms underlying school failure and how gene by environment interaction may put children with executive function deficits and social difficulties at risk for poor life outcomes and subsequent mental health disorders. The focus of her research program is to identify unique mechanisms and strategies that allow children and adolescents with disorders of executive function to reach their social, emotional and academic potential. Specifically, Dr. Schuck is the principal investigator of Project Positive Assertive Cooperative Kids (P.A.C.K.), a randomized clinical trial examining the safety and efficacy of Canine Assisted Interventions for children with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder that was funded by the National Institute for Child Health & Human Development and the Mars/Waltham Cooperation. She is currently collaborating on a pilot study in a county juvenile detention facility examining the effects of a dog fostering program utilized in several of the residence blocks. Other areas of research include understanding the role of nutrition and fitness for building resilience in children with disorders or executive function. Dr. Schuck is also the Executive Director of the UC Irvine Health Child Development Center School, a school-based behavioral health program for about 90 children and adolescents with ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorders.

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