Pediatric healthcare organizations often create innovative interventions to promote the physical and emotional well-being of their patients and to provide a sense of normalcy for children in their care. At Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has proven its value over the past 30 years as a complementary, non-traditional therapy that can improve the quality of life and psychological state of vulnerable patients and families.

Children’s has created a unique pediatric therapy dog program called Canines For KidsSM. The program comprises a trained facility dog that is partnered with a Children’s employee, with whom they work and live.1

A review of literature found early research studies of AAT that describe the feasibility of program implementation1 and delineate components of effective hospital policies to safeguard the patient in both outpatient and inpatient settings for children and adults.2,3 These studies evaluate biophysical metrics such as heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol levels as indicators of physiologic changes related to stress reduction after AAT interactions.4
The biggest barrier and possible source of resistance encountered by healthcare organizations that wish to start a facility dog AAT program is fear of potential injury or infection associated with animal encounters.²

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<tr>
<th>Physiological Benefits</th>
<th>Psychological Benefits</th>
<th>Cost Effective Treatment</th>
<th>Improved Clinical Outcomes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improved Quality of Life</td>
<td>Improved Mood and Well-being</td>
<td>Cost-Effective</td>
<td>Improved Recovery and Health Outcomes</td>
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The literature review concluded that AAT’s positive effect on children is consistent across studies from patient, parent, and healthcare provider perspectives. Although these multiple studies support positive consequences of AAT, the literature review identified concerns about possible negative consequences of animal visitation in the hospital setting including possible allergic reaction, injury, or infection.

Three hospitals published results that tracked the number of patient visits by therapy dogs in order to document any associated infections, but found none.⁵⁻⁷ Current AAT policy recommendations encourage diligent hand washing and grooming practices before and after patient encounters, similar to current practices that healthcare providers use to reduce risk of infection transmission between patients. To date, the therapeutic benefits of AAT for hospitalized children far outweigh potential risks.

Comprehensive recommendations published in the journal *Infection Control & Hospital Epidemiology* in 2015 were used in creating Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta’s current policy on Animal Visitation (Policy #2.07).⁸ Currently, because of the focus on patient safety and multi-disciplinary collaboration, AAT patient encounters with dogs provided by Canines For Kids℠ and community based animal...
therapy programs have resulted in no reported adverse events and no documented associated infections.

In 2009, Lisa Kinsel, Manager of Volunteer Services at Children’s Scottish Rite, saw the need to transition the current AAT program from occasional visits to a full-time dog on staff. What seemed as a natural partnership with Canine Assistants led us to create Canines For Kids, as Canine Assistants’ service dogs in training were already visiting the hospital. Casper, an 18-month-old golden/lab mix, was chosen to pioneer the Canines For Kids program as the first full-time dog on staff. Casper stays by Kinsel’s side during the day as she works as the Manager of Volunteer Services. When visits are requested, Kinsel adjusts her schedule to allow Casper to do his job and meet the needs of patients and families. Flexibility, a strong bond, and belief in the value of the Canines For Kids program are key elements of their successful partnership that help Casper and Kinsel make a difference in the complex and often unsettling world of pediatric healthcare. Currently, the Canines for Kids program has expanded to 13 facility dogs and their handlers. The visitation policy continues to be revised to allow greater access to wider populations such as ICU, hematology/oncology, transplant, and even the bone marrow transplant unit.

Based on the overwhelming success of the Canines For Kids program from the perspectives of patients, parents,
and staff, plans are underway to expand the AAT program to additional inpatient and outpatient locations at Children’s. Expanding the program requires finding the donor funding to support and sustain Canines For KidsSM. All costs associated with the Canines For KidsSM program are donor funded, and therefore the program does not incur any direct costs to the healthcare system. At present, research studies and a multi-site quality improvement project are underway to study the unique interaction of dog, patient, parent, and staff. These studies will contribute to greater knowledge of this alternative therapy that brings so many smiles to all. As word of the success of the Canines For KidsSM program has spread nationally, Children’s is recognized as the flagship program for full-time AAT. As a result, healthcare organizations ask for guidance to establish similar programs for their own hospitals. Canine Assistants® reports an increased number of requests for healthcare facility dogs each year, both locally and nationally. This enduring partnership coupled with Children’s research and advocacy efforts will continue to make a difference in the quality of life of hospitalized children and families as well as the morale of pediatric healthcare staff.

References


