



Using Dogs at a Child Advocacy Center Best Practices

Overview

The use of well-trained dogs to provide emotional support can contribute to the mission of a Child Advocacy Center (CAC) in several ways.

Children are much more likely to relax at the center if they enjoy interacting with a well-trained dog. Parents are happy to see that the CAC cares about their child's welfare and the facility is doing everything possible to provide for the child's comfort and reduce his stress. Parents often enjoy the dogs themselves and if they are feeling less stressed, the child will be reassured by the parent's more relaxed attitude. Children also provide better information about the incident during a forensic interview due to the presence of a loving dog. Skilled dog handlers, members of the professional staff, also serve as positive role models to families through their kind treatment of the dogs.

Type of Dog

A Facility Dog is a professionally trained adult animal that is acquired from an organization that specializes in training service dogs. This dog lives with a member of the CAC staff and works full time at the center. A Facility Dog is prepared to work in the most demanding environments such as the courtroom and in forensic interviews as soon as they are placed at the facility.

Benefits

Highly -trained dogs will provide multiple opportunities for excellent public relations for a CAC. Local media are usually happy to provide full coverage of a dog program, especially as the program begins. When well-trained dogs attend your fund raising events more potential donors are apt to attend.

The benefits of the use of a Facility Dog to provide emotional support for young clients and their families easily justify the costs in staff time and funding to establish a program in line with recognized best practices in this area.



A Facility Dog at a Child Advocacy Center

Best Practices

A Facility Dog is the answer for a CAC that wants a highly trained dog that can work in forensic interviews, defense interviews, and accompany a child into the courtroom.

Where do we get a dog?

Organizations that specialize in the training of service and facility dogs are accredited by an international society called Assistance Dogs International (ADI). A CAC can find an accredited organization in their region by using the directory on the ADI website - <http://www.assistancedogsinternational.org/> .

Who will be the handler?

The Facility Dog will need to have a primary handler who is willing to accept full responsibility for the dog's welfare. This primary handler, usually a forensic interviewer or a victim advocate, will be the person at the CAC who will use the dog most often in her work. In addition to the primary handler, one or more secondary handlers will need to be trained to handle the dog correctly.

What are the costs for a Facility Dog?

Many ADI accredited organizations provide the dogs at little or no cost to the CAC. The cost associated with establishing a Facility Dog program includes the required training for the primary handler, which is often done at the facility where the dog was trained. While there may be no charge for the dog by the training organization, there will be travel expenses, and the primary handler will be away from work for one to two weeks. The only continuing costs for a Facility Dog program are the standard costs associated with any dog – food, toys, and veterinary care. Some CACs seek specific funding from local civic groups who donate to sponsor the dog for the children of the community. Many ADI accredited organizations provide insurance for the dogs that they train, but it is important to check on this for your specific case.

Handling a Facility Dog at a CAC

Maximizing the use of a Facility Dog at a CAC will require creativity and persistence. The idea of a working dog will be new to staff members and a good bit of education will be necessary. The dog will often be needed in forensic interviews and the courtroom, but some of his important work will also be done in chance encounters with stressed children throughout the center.

The Facility Dog's primary handler will be taught by the dog training organization how to communicate effectively with the dog and what guidelines must be used in shaping the environment for the dog's needs. Upon returning to the CAC with the dog, the handler will face the task of educating all the other staff members in how to treat the dog. As a working dog, the Facility Dog should not be fed by staff or played with except at delineated play times. (Some handlers have a regular Dog Happy Hour each day when staff members are welcome to play with the dog. During this time, the dog's Facility Dog vest is removed so that he understands that he is not on duty.)

Although the primary handler will usually have the dog with her, at times it will be necessary for another trained handler to work with the dog. For this reason, the primary handler should discuss the situation with the ADI organization that provided the dog and get their advice on how to educate the secondary handler(s). Some organizations will allow two handlers to attend the initial training with the dog, some will provide training later for a secondary handler, and some will allow the primary handler to train a secondary handler using materials provided by the organization. In any case, it will be essential that untrained individuals not handle the dog, as the dog can be "untrained" with surprising ease.

When the Facility Dog is working in a complex environment, such as accompanying a child on the witness stand during a trial, it is essential that there is a handler present who is solely dedicated to handling the dog. A prosecutor in the midst of questioning the witness is not able to be aware of subtle nonverbal communication from the dog and react to steady his behavior. No matter how highly trained the dog is, he is still a dog, and must be guided by a human handler when working.

Dogs working in the courtroom or forensic interviews

Only highly trained Facility Dogs should assist victims and witnesses in the courtroom or in forensic interviews. They have been specially selected by the service dog organization for having the right temperament to work in this high stress environment because they have calm, emotionally intuitive demeanors. While working, these dogs can be relied upon to follow commands to sit or lie down until they are released from that position thereby allowing their handlers to do their jobs. They also enjoy interacting with strangers and don't have to rely upon their handlers to feel secure.

Courtroom setting

The use of a trained dog in the courtroom is in its infancy. Many judges are concerned about the dog disrupting the proceedings by barking, wandering around the courtroom and engaging in other behavior that could divert the attention of the jurors from the proceedings.

A dog working in this setting should be able to sit or lie down next to the victim or witness for an extended period of time. In one case a judge required a Facility Dog to remain by the witness and out of sight of the jurors as a condition of being allowed into the courtroom.

Attorneys are urged to argue the motion for the use of the dog with the dog present in the courtroom to demonstrate how well behaved, quiet and unobtrusive the dog is.

Facility Dogs are able to take non-verbal direction from their handlers from anywhere in the courtroom without having to be joined together by a leash. In addition, if there is an unexpected outburst in the courtroom, a Facility Dog will remain calm.

Forensic Interviews

During a forensic interview the dog should not distract the child, but instead either lie beside the child or remain by the child's side so that the child can pet or touch the dog. During the interview the dog should move very little so that the dog does not distract the child. The dog should not whine or bark or show any sign of distress. The interviewer should be able to completely focus on the child and conduct the interview rather than spend time asking the dog to behave properly.

Managing a Facility Dog in a professional environment

Regular grooming of the Facility Dog is necessary to reduce the amount of hair left around the CAC and to minimize any doggy odor. In addition to a consistent schedule of brushing and bathing, the Facility Dog will need to have his teeth brushed and his nails clipped and filed. His nails should be kept very short and filed smooth, as children will be likely to handle his feet. The dog's handler should keep a supply of damp wipes (regular baby wipes work just fine) in her office for cleaning of his coat in order to minimize the accumulation of dander on the surface.

Routine vacuuming of the spaces where the dog works, plus weekly laundering of any bedding, will be the only facility cleaning that is needed. The handler should always have hand sanitizer with her when accompanied by the dog, and should offer it to children who pet the dog and encourage them to use it. Lint rollers available at various places around the office will help staff members (as well as parents and children) look their best after being in contact with the dog; this will be especially important if your Facility Dog has a light colored coat.

Acquainting parents and children with the dog program

A sign in your lobby should announce the presence of a Facility Dog at your CAC. A photo of the dog, along with his handlers, will be a good first step toward introducing the dog to the families. The Facility Dog should wear his identifying vest whenever he is on duty at the center. This will help differentiate him from other working dogs (such as police dogs) that the clients may have previously encountered. If your CAC has been covered in the print media, be sure to post these favorable articles about the dog program in your lobby, as they will increase the impact of the program.

Keeping your Facility Dog healthy and happy

The rules for keeping your Facility Dog healthy and happy are the same as those for every dog, but since your dog will be at work for hours at a stretch, it is easy to stress the dog unintentionally. Remember that your Facility Dog will need exercise every day – a brisk walk in the morning and evening will be enough for some dogs; others will need more. He will need fresh water available at times throughout the day. If the office where the dog spends much of his time is at some distance from a water faucet, make it a practice to fill a water bottle each morning and add to his water dish several times during the working day. A good rule of thumb is that the dog should have access to water at least every two hours while working.

When the Facility Dog is not working with children and families, he should have the use of an appropriately sized crate in a quiet place, ideally in his handler's office. The crate should be furnished with soft bedding, a favorite toy, and a full water bowl. The Facility Dog should not be disturbed unnecessarily when he is "off duty" in his crate, which is equivalent to a den for him. The Facility Dog is not there to entertain staff or visitors; if he has a busy day with the children, he needs time to sleep or just be by himself. Studies have shown that a dog left to his own devices will sleep much of the day; when we ask a dog to work for hours on end we need to provide some down time for him.

While it may seem too basic to mention, a dog will be most comfortable if given frequent chances to toilet during the day. It is easy for the handler to become absorbed with her work and not to realize that it has been hours since the dog has been outdoors. This can lead to deterioration in the dog's performance, and is simple to avoid.

When the Facility Dog is transported to and from work, or between facilities (such as from the CAC to the courthouse), he should be in a plastic airline-type crate or a dog seat belt harness should be used. The Facility Dog is a valuable asset for the CAC, and this simple precaution may save the dog's life or prevent his bolting from the scene of an accident.

A dog is happiest when he has clear direction and knows what he is supposed to be doing. This can be best accomplished by limiting the number of handlers who use the dog and by insisting on consistency among the handlers. The primary handler will be the logical person to be sure that the dog is kept at a high level of performance by competent handling.

Scientific Articles in Support of the Use of Dogs at a CAC

Brodie, Sarah J., and Francis C. Biley. "An exploration of the potential benefits of pet-facilitated therapy." Journal of Clinical Nursing 8 (2001): 329-37.

Gee, Nancy R., Shelly L. Harris, and Kristina L. Johnson. "The role of therapy dogs in speed and accuracy to complete motor skills tasks for preschool children." Anthrozoos 20 (2007): 375-86

Granger, Ben P., and Lori R. Kogan. "Characteristics of Animal-Assisted Therapy/Activity in Specialized Settings." Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy : Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice. Ed. Aubrey H. Fine. New York: Academic P, 2006. 263-85.

Jalongo, Mary R., Terri Astorino, and Nancy Bomboy. "Canine visitors: The influence of therapy dogs on young children's learning and well-being in classrooms and hospitals." Early Childhood Education Journal, 32 (2004): 9-16.

Morrison, Michelle L. "Health Benefits of Animal-Assisted Interventions." Complementary Health Practice Review 12 (2007): 51-62.

Nagengast, Sunny L., Mara M. Baun, Mary Megel, and J. M. Leibowitz. "The effects of the presence of a companion animal on physiological arousal and behavioral distress in children during a physical examination." Journal of Pediatric Nursing 12 (1997): 323-30.

Odendaar, J.S. J., and R. A. Meintjes. "Neurophysiological Correlates of Affiliative Behaviour between Humans and Dogs." The Veterinary Journal 165 (2003): 296-301.

Paradise, Julie L. "An analysis of improving student performance through the use of registered therapy dogs serving as motivators for reluctant readers." Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences, 68 (2007): 932.

Parish-Plass, Nancy. "Animal-assisted therapy with children suffering from insecure attachment due to abuse and neglect: A method to lower the risk of intergenerational transmission of abuse?" Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry 13 (2008): 7-30.

Wood, Lisa J., Billie Giles-Corti, Max K. Bulsara, and Darcy A. Bosch. "More Than a Furry Companion: The Ripple Effect of Companion Animals on Neighborhood Interactions and Sense of Community." Society and Animals 15 (2007): 43-56.

Recommended Books for CAC Staff

Aloff, Brenda. Canine Body Language A Photographic Guide Interpreting the Native Language of the Domestic Dog. Grand Rapids: Dogwise, 2005.

Coren, Stanley. How Dogs Think What the World Looks Like to Them and Why They Act the Way They Do. New York: Free P, 2005.

Donaldson, Jean. Culture Clash. Berkeley, Calif: James & Kenneth, 1996.

Fine, Aubrey H. Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy, Second Edition Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice. New York: Academic P, 2006.

McConnell, Patricia B. The Other End of the Leash: Why We Do What We Do Around Dogs. New York: Ballantine Books, 2003.

Pryor, Karen. Don't Shoot the Dog!: The New Art of Teaching and Training. New York: Ringpress Books, 2002. [NEED CITY OF PUBLICATION]

Sundance, Kyra, and Chalcy. 101 Dog Tricks Step by Step Activities to Engage, Challenge, and Bond with Your Dog. New York: Quarry Books, 2007.