7 Animal selection procedures in animal-assisted interaction programs

Maureen Fredrickson-MacNamara MSW, CEIP *, Kris Butler†

* Animal Systems, Ltd, † American Dog Obedience Center, LLC

7.1 Introduction

Today’s animal-assisted interaction programs now place animal/handler teams into close relationship with people and into settings never imagined by the crafters of standards and selection procedures developed over 15 years ago. While the changing role of animals and the settings in which they work does not mean that previous work is irrelevant, these changes require taking a step back to reassess the objectives of selection procedures in light of new information and considerably more experience.

One of the primary changes in the practice of animal-assisted interactions is the mounting recognition of the value of animal contact by providers in the fields of human health, development, and education. The increased recognition is due, in part, to findings revealing that the incorporation of animals may result in positive progress toward human physical, cognitive, psychosocial, communication, and educational goals (Barker et al., 2003; Cole and Gawlinski, 2000; McGibbon et al., 1998; Marr et al., 2000; Odendaal, 2000). Concurrently, a dramatic increase in the expectations of animals and the handlers involved in animal-assisted interaction programs has occurred as health care and education providers must demonstrate a value to participants in order to justify any risk associated with animal contact (Beck, 2000). The skills and aptitude required of animals engaged in participant-specific medical, psychological, and educational applications is a role that is new, specific, and profound.

It is, therefore, imperative that selection procedures be based on the realities of the job that the animals are asked to perform. This chapter provides a brief overview of the development of selection procedures for animal/handler teams engaged in animal-assisted interactions. Additionally, the extent to which current procedures truly assess the specific behavioral repertoire and skills required of the animals and whether these practices provide an accurate picture of the animal’s “fit” with participant specific applications is examined. Next, the chapter will compare and contrast the selection and training practices of animals engaged in animal-assisted interactions with the selection and training practices of other animal functions such as police work and
competition. Finally, the chapter recommends the development of selection procedures that accurately reflect the role of the animal in moving adults and children across the lifespan toward increased functional capacity. Throughout the chapter the authors will focus primarily on the selection of dogs and horses as these two species are most commonly encountered in animal-assisted interactions; however, it should be noted that the selection of other animals most often follows either similar procedures to dogs and horses or are included but lack specific procedures.

### 7.2 Description of terms

In order to consider carefully animal selection requirements, it is important to understand how programs including animals in the delivery of services are defined, with providers and volunteer organizations differing in how they characterize these activities (Fredrickson, 2003). Animal-assisted interactions is a term which includes two types of human/animal interactions: animal-assisted activities (AAA), or animal visits, with spontaneous content, volunteer implementation, and no participant-specific goals, and animal-assisted therapy (AAT), a specified interaction, implemented by a trained human health, welfare or education professional to meet explicit participant-specific goals (Delta Society, 1996).

While no definition is perfect, the distinction between these two types of human/animal interactions is by no means utilized with any regularity or predictability. This chapter will utilize the term animal-assisted interactions to refer to these activities in general and the term animal-assisted applications to refer to those interactions meeting the definition of animal-assisted therapy as described above for the following reasons.

First, many programs focus on the delivery of educational applications such as reading improvement. Even though these programs may meet the animal-assisted therapy criteria of explicit participant-specific goals, specified interactions, and implemented by an education professional, labeling these applications as “therapy” is confusing and misleading. Second, volunteer handlers and volunteer handler organizations often view the terms animal-assisted activities and animal-assisted therapy from a hierarchical perspective, perceiving animal-assisted activities as less than or not as important as animal-assisted therapy (Fredrickson, 2003). Thus, the names of animal/handler registries and in the titles given to animals involved in these programs are most often associated with animal-assisted therapy (i.e. Therapy Dogs International®). Third, most, if not all animals engaged in human/animal interaction programs are referred to as a therapy animal (i.e. therapy horse, therapy dog) whether the animal interaction consists of a volunteer implemented, spontaneous interaction with no participant-specific goals or consists of specified interactions, implemented

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1 As past Vice President of Programs for the Delta Society, the first author facilitated terminology discussions at national conferences of the Delta Society and North American Riding for the Handicapped Association. Volunteers consistently stated that activities not meeting the criteria of specified interaction, implemented by a trained human health, welfare or education professional to meet explicit participant-specific goals, were therapeutic, thus fitting the definition of animal-assisted therapy.
by a trained human health, welfare or education professional to meet explicit participant-specific goals. Finally, the majority of animal-assisted interaction programs are referred to as animal-assisted therapy even when the human/animal interaction lacks explicit participant-specific goals and specified interactions and is implemented by a volunteer rather than a trained human health, welfare or education professional (Katcher, 2000). This is an important point when considering the factors relevant to selecting animals for work directly with a medical, psychological or educational provider in a participant-specific application.

7.3 Animal selection procedures; a brief overview

In the 1970s, a majority of animal-assisted intervention programs incorporating companion animals were implemented by animal welfare organizations that encouraged volunteers to take animals in the shelter to visit people in nursing homes and other residential settings. The focus of the programs was to provide a recreational activity and a break from the monotony and isolation of residential living (Corson et al., 1975). However, by the 1990s, concerns about health risks associated with animals, fleas, ticks, bacterial diarrhea, a propensity to bite or scratch or jump on people when startled, and any number of other hazards had greatly reduced this practice. In addition, concerns for the welfare and health of the animals themselves were raised. The A.S.P.C.A. reported that, “visiting strange settings with unpredictable people and unusual noises stresses the animals, especially young animals that are awaiting adoption” (Shelter Animals, 1992). Therapeutic riding programs provided riding lessons as a recreational activity for adults and children with physical or cognitive disabilities who were excluded from other types of recreation. These programs had no structured approach to help guide the development of the animal-assisted interactions (Beck, 2000; Spink, 1993).

The programs of this era, primarily, utilized selection procedures intended to reduce the risk of contact with animals. For example, early dog selection procedures focused on public health risks such as species-specific diseases, parasites, injuries caused by bites or scratches, and injuries from a dog’s interference with equipment or people (i.e. scratching, tripping someone or jumping on people). Similarly, horses were selected based on a steady nature, and their tractability around people with limited physical control and unusual equipment. Thus, the minimum selection criteria for the animals in these early programs included documentation of some form of animal behavioral screening by a veterinarian, evidence of routine veterinary care such as annual vaccinations, and internal and external parasite control (NARHA, 1994; New and Strimple, 1988).

During the 1980s, a number of studies carried out in a variety of institutional settings reported improvement in human functioning in a number of areas such as improved affect, decreases in aggression and better attendance in psychiatric sessions (Banziger and Roush, 1983; Brickel, 1984; Francis et al., 1985; Hendy, 1984; Kongable et al., 1989; Robb, 1983). The findings propelled the trend for long-term care facilities to acquire resident animals with risk management as the primary concern.
In 1983, *Guidelines: Animals in Nursing Homes* (Hines et al., 1983) recommended that prior to placing animals in the facility a full assessment should be performed including assessment of the social needs of residents, evaluation of the layout of the facility, and consideration of the role of the animals in the facility. The *Guidelines* did not address selection of animals that accompanied a non-professional volunteer or a staff member’s pet which stayed during a particular shift. Health care providers, experienced volunteers and animal care and welfare professionals created recommendations for companion animals which continued to focus primarily on the medical and physical safety of the participants. The minimum selection criteria for animals included medical screening, temperament/behavioral evaluation, and methods to monitor the animals over time (New and Strimple, 1988). Visiting animals were most frequently screened by using puppy temperament tests and other breed-specific temperament evaluations.

At the same time, the appeal of integrating horses to benefit people with disabilities seemed to be greater to horsemen and riding instructors than to professionals in medicine, special education, and mental health. For volunteer providers in these programs, risk management remained the primary concern of selection procedures. Conversely, in a small number of equine-assisted applications in which the goal was the pursuit of specific clinical and remedial applications (i.e. hippotherapy), horses were also evaluated in terms of the quality of the gaits as the horse’s movement directly affects the rider’s posture, balance and coordination (Glasow and Spink, 1992).

By the 1990s, a plethora of not-for-profit organizations were launched by pet owners (rather than professionals in medical, psychological or educational fields) to identify volunteers and their pets that had passed generalized screening procedures are were considered safe to visit. Approved animal/volunteer teams visited any number of different institutions. Volunteers included people who visited, handling their own pets (dogs, cats, rabbits), and those who handled resident animals that participants could visit within farm and therapeutic riding programs. Thus it became important not only to determine risk of contact with animals but also to identify the ways in which the handler influenced the animal. Screening procedures once designed with the animal as its exclusive focus now began to explicate the expectations of the person presenting the animal (i.e. the handler) (Hines and Fredrickson, 1998).

Concurrently, the first standards for human/animal interactions were published. *Standards of Practice for Animal-Assisted Therapy and Animal-Assisted Activities* (Delta Society, 1996) combined recommendations made in guidelines for placing resident animals with public health concerns. Thus the Standards not only defined the different types of human/animal interactions but also described animal selection procedures based on broad criteria, such as reliability, predictability, controllability, and suitability, in order to address the majority of risk management concerns encountered in a variety of facilities (Fredrickson and Howie, 2000). The Standards provided a framework to shift the focus of selection procedures from an exclusive concern for the medical and physical safety of participants to considerations for handler skill and concerns for the impact of the facility on the animal. This was also true for standards for therapeutic riding programs or farm programs.
Since the advent of the twenty-first century, high profile events such as school shootings and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 fueled the desire of a variety of individuals to share their pets with others. As a result, animal-assisted interactions implemented through non-professional, volunteer organizations expanded into increasingly chaotic and unpredictable settings such as schools and mental health treatment facilities. To justify the increased risk and secure acceptance within the health care and education industry, national companion animal and equine organizations recommended expanded selection procedures to identify the ways in which a number of variables within the whole environment, not just a particular facility, influenced animal behavior (Fredrickson-MacNamara and Butler, 2006).

These recommendations left plenty of room for community-based organizations to develop selection procedures tailored to determine the degree to which the animal/handler team possessed the skills and aptitude needed in a specific environment. Few, if any, organizations have taken this step; instead crafting selection procedures that use a single procedure that attempts to determine the appropriateness of an animal/handler team in any type of environment with little or no regard for the different applications that might be utilized within any given environment.

In addition, most selection procedures are carried out at two-year intervals with the animal considered appropriate for work during the length of this time but without consideration for events that may alter the animal’s behavior or health. In a study of horse temperament tests, researchers concluded that only a small number of behavioral parameters were consistent beyond the first year (Visser et al., 2001). This raises concerns regarding current testing practices as many require retesting at a variety of intervals ranging from only once in the animal’s life to every two years.

Currently, the perception that animal-assisted applications are a valid modality for improvement in participant functioning among providers of health, mental health, and education services has increased significantly. However, along with the increased acceptance of animal-assisted applications has come a heightened requirement for these interactions to result in progress toward participant-specific goals. Choosing the best animal for a specific participant for a given medical, psychological or educational application requires more information than is provided by selection procedures designed for interactions that consist of spontaneous content and no participant-specific goals. Thus, an activity such as walking a dog must result in improvement in measurable goals identified in the participant’s individual treatment or education plan. It is also important to understand the attributes of an animal that are most likely to positively impact the health and well-being of people of different cultural backgrounds and histories. Without this knowledge, generalizations may be made that lead to false expectations and failure in animal-assisted applications.

Similarly, therapeutic riding programs have traditionally used retired performance horses due to convenience, availability or the belief that a simple change of equipment can convert the horse to a different behavioral orientation. Spink (1993) writes that, “using a substandard mount to work toward highly specialized therapeutic objectives is analogous to playing a beautiful piece of classical music on a honkytonk piano. If the horse can be likened to an instrument (albeit one with feelings and personality),
the instrument used in treatment-oriented programs must be highly refined and calibrated to a precise standard” (p. 95).

### 7.3.1 Mythology of selection procedures

Despite selection procedures’ evolution from a risk management and risk reduction focus to an animal/handler team and environmental perspective, the fact remains that most selection procedures do not identify the specific ways in which the team is expected to interact with participants in animal-assisted applications. Current selection procedures were developed to identify people and socialized pets most likely to be safe enough to visit—somewhere. Approval of animal/handler teams by community organizations is, most often, predicated upon the principle that a test of the animal’s trained basic obedience skills and, in some cases, a demonstration of willingness to interact with people is a reflection of the animal’s future reactions and responses to unfamiliar people and unfamiliar circumstances. Unfortunately, few events are substantively comparable to animal-assisted applications. Nevertheless, from a single test, often administered at a training center familiar to the animal, “somewhere” translates to “anywhere.”

Yet, a number of studies have found that an animal’s behavior is governed by context. In tests of grazing animals, studies have found that behavior was predictive of only certain types of behavior such as shying and that specific behaviors were related, primarily, to the context in which the animals were evaluated (Boissy, 1995; Lanier et al., 2000; Stephen et al., 2001). In a study of the inter-relationship between various dog behaviors, Goodloe and Borchelt (1998) found only a limited link between obedience training and desirable behaviors. The author suggested that owners willing to spend more time with their dogs may behave differently with their dogs and therefore reduce the dog’s fear in new and unusual situations.

Moreover, in a study of dogs’ play behavior, Svarberg and Forkman (2002) reported that the behavior of family dogs was influenced more by the type of the game (and to a certain extent by the level of fear) than by their familiarity to the play partner or their willingness to retrieve and tendency for being possessive. The authors found that dogs do not generalize these behavior routines to other, functionally different situations. And, similar to the findings of Goodloe and Borchelt (1998), this study found that dogs that received more playful interaction with their owner were less likely to show fear during play in an unfamiliar place. It would seem from these two studies that a relevant question for handlers would be the amount of time they spend with their dog.

Moreover, a real concern is the fact that few evaluation procedures regularly include children and yet many dogs are involved in programs that bring unpredictable children and dogs together. This is particularly disturbing in light of the fact that most dog bites in the USA involve children and a dog that is familiar to them (Beck and Jones, 1985). A study of the importance of dogs having contact with children during puppy socialization periods found that dogs have difficulty getting along with children if they have not been socialized as puppies to children (Arai and Ohta, 2009; Tóth et al., 2008).

Another concern regarding the use of selection procedures developed for animal-assisted interactions is the fact that the evaluator tests animals without a clear idea of the skills expected of the animal during animal-assisted applications. In order to
accurately assess the animal’s and handler’s appropriateness, the context of the situation must be clear to the evaluator. Prior to assessing aptitude or skills, it is critical first to know what outcome is expected (De Becker, 1997). When the outcome of the selection procedure is unclear, the reliability of the test is no better than mere chance. In the case of most animal-assisted applications, a better degree of prediction than chance is needed to provide participants and sponsors with confidence in the viability of the program.

The majority of selection procedures are conducted by individuals who volunteer their time to administer a particular test developed by national or local organizations. The individual conducting the selection procedure may meet training and experience criteria of a national human/animal interaction organization or may be an animal professional such as a veterinarian or animal trainer. This factor brings into question the degree to which various evaluators understand the dynamics of animal-assisted applications. Understanding the unique interplay of the animal’s and the handler’s abilities and aptitude in relation to participant-specific goals can be a crucial element. For example, an evaluator who shows dogs in competition obedience, and is unfamiliar with the ways in which a social worker may incorporate a dog in work with a participant to improve personal boundaries, might reject a dog unless it demonstrated precision obedience skills. However, these skills may not be relevant to the participant with whom the dog will work.

Recommendations for evaluators involved in selecting horses for animal-assisted applications suggest that such evaluations be carried out by a team. The team should be comprised of two people who are highly qualified in horse training, behavior and riding. At least one of the people involved in the selection procedure should be skilled in the specific application in which the horse will work (Spink, 1993).

Katcher (2000) writes that as long as animal-assisted applications remain a volunteer activity implemented by handlers dedicated to one particular species or breed of companion animal, the factors which influence participant outcomes will remain elusive. This brings up an important point in terms of the degree to which animal-assisted applications are a suitable fit for volunteer handlers and their pets.

There is a strong social and emotional connection between handlers and their animals. For example, researchers in Japan (Nagasawa et al., 2009) found that interactions with dogs, especially those initiated by the dogs’ gazing at their owners, can increase hormones associated with human attachment (i.e. oxytocin). The animals, after all, often hold the admission tickets to activities their handlers enjoy very much. It is understandable that some handlers measure a degree of their worth based on the recognition they receive from their animal-related services (Butler, 2004a).

A study of family members’ perception of the pet dog’s temperament conducted by Ledger and Baxter (1996) found that family members varied considerably in their report of the dog’s temperament. As such, it is a rare dog or horse owner who willingly acknowledges that their animal is inappropriate for an application or may be ineffective in certain situations. The handler who knows that golden retrievers make the best therapy dogs cannot be objective enough to believe that both outcomes are possible.

Sometimes handlers want to keep the team intact, even when the animal is ready to break up the act (Butler, 2004a). Dodging this phenomenon is not simply unfortunate,
it can be also abusive. How the animal interacts toward participants and within the specific environment is often indicative of the animal’s comfort level. An animal consistently placed in untenable situations may eventually retaliate. Here is another example of how critical the handler’s skills are. If a handler is not sensitive to and respectful of the needs of the animal, the handler can inadvertently place his/her needs over those of the animal. This may result in illness for a submissive animal, or aggression in the case of an assertive or fearful animal. When denial keeps handlers from accepting the unwanted reality that their animals are not appropriate for the work, handlers may offer excuses—rationalizations, minimizations, and justifications—to remove any blame from a behavior.

In the foreword to Therapy Dogs Today (Butler, 2004b), Fredrickson-MacNamara wrote that effective handlers are capable of sublimating their own egos during animal-assisted application sessions. Although handlers who work with animals in competitions or the performance of specific management tasks are congratulated for their skill and expertise, handlers who work within animal-assisted applications must be able to sublimate themselves to the developing intimacy between the participant and the animal. Those handlers who understand that the focus and purpose of interactions is the participant struggling to heal and not to their animal or themselves have reached a significant level of maturity and expertise in this work. Without this understanding, the handler remains in competition with the participant for reward and recognition.

This may contribute to the current trend for handlers to select animals as potential partners in animal-assisted interaction programs based on a perceived metaphorical connection between the animal and participants. For example, handlers may select a dog that needs a home, a dog that surely was abused rationalizing that the dog should be a therapy animal so he can share his story. Some handlers have been known to select animals with amputations with the notion that participants will identify with the dog’s loss without consulting mental health staff as to participant goals.

Concerns regarding this practice are two-fold. First, handlers who decide that an abused or neglected animal may be appropriate for work in animal-assisted applications before the animal has been rehabilitated may ignore the needs of the animal in terms of its own healing. Many animals with abuse histories remain distrustful of strangers and unpredictable places for the rest of their lives. Second, the use of metaphor is not a technique that should be implemented by a volunteer. Selecting an animal based on a similarity to participant histories may interfere with the process and focus determined as most appropriate by mental health or medical professionals.

7.4 Selection based on outcome vs settings

In general, animal-assisted interactions incorporate animals in ways that can be loosely categorized; implicitly observing or being in the presence of animals, explicitly looking at or observing animals, and interacting with animals. These parameters provide a context from which to consider participant interaction. The greater the degree of contact between animal and participant the greater the demand for clear definitions of optimum animal behavioral and skill capacities.
In sessions that incorporate animals by creating opportunities for participants to observe or be in the presence of animals, there may be little need for evaluation of individual animals. For example, in residential centers for patients with Alzheimer’s disease, an aviary built along hallways can help residents focus externally. While it is important to select the appropriate animals (birds as opposed to sedentary reptiles), evaluating each finch for specific behaviors is less important. The expected outcome of the interaction between participants and animals requires a passive role for the animal.

Animal-assisted applications require the most rigorous definition of outcomes and the relationship of the selection procedure to actual interaction with the participant. Animal-assisted rehabilitation applications provide an excellent example of situations in which it is critical to determine the most appropriate species as well as important to determine the performance expectations of the individual animal. A participant who has head injuries may work with a dog during inpatient rehabilitation sessions. Once discharged, the same participant may be referred to a hippotherapy program to continue to work on balance and coordination needs with a physical or occupational therapist.

In this case, participant goals must first be clearly defined. While the participant is an inpatient, goals may be standing balance and speech improvement. A quiet dog or even a cat or rabbit may be appropriate in this setting. It is possible that, once discharged, intervention goals for the participant will change. Goals could be directed more toward social interactions and less focused on physical rehabilitation. A therapeutic riding program that enables the participant to learn riding skills with the help of volunteers and a quiet, well-behaved horse has different performance expectations from the hippotherapy program that focuses on rhythmic balance changes and may require a horse that moves with more spark and energy.

More explicit participant goals may be defined in a rehabilitation program in which the participant is specifically directed to look at a particular animal and describe it. The same role may be required in a mental health program for children with emotional disorders. A therapist may ask the participant to identify non-verbal behavior. In these types of interventions, the goals of each program will demand more specificity in terms of the individual animal’s behavior. A dog incorporated in the rehabilitation program may be required to lie quietly on a table while a horse incorporated in the mental health program would be more effective if it was highly interactive with other horses in the environment.

In another example, consider a psychotherapy application in which a therapist works with a mentally ill adult regarding the effects his aggressive behavior has on others. The therapist may choose to work with a horse that will move away from the adult unless the adult speaks in a softer tone, moves more slowly, and minimizes gesturing. For this application to be effective as well as safe, the handler must have a clear understanding of the performance expectations for the horse and must not interfere with the horse’s natural instinct to retreat or the therapeutic value is greatly diminished, if not lost. However, it is critical that the handler ensures that the interaction does not become too stressful for the horse.

Imagine the effectiveness of a plumber whose only tool is a pipe wrench, or a carpenter with only a hammer, or, more importantly, a physician who carries only
one drug. The effectiveness of any of these professionals would be severely limited if not totally impossible if their tools were limited to a few items or a single type of tool. This is essentially the situation encountered in the field of animal-assisted applications. Applications are most frequently developed around the availability of animals and handlers. These animals are then incorporated into programs not necessarily because they are the best suited to the task at hand but because they are at the door.

While this situation may not be a cause for concern in animal-assisted interaction programs designed for spontaneous content and generalized motivational or recreational impact, this practice can severely limit development of effective and efficient animal-assisted applications. To date, animal-assisted interactions are driven by the preferences of the handler, or community organization, not the goals of the participant. For example, the majority of screening procedures are targeted toward dogs. Indeed, a number of volunteer animal-assisted interaction organizations such as Therapy Dogs International and Therapy Dogs, Inc. restrict their programs to dogs. This aspect of volunteer-driven programs has resulted in the majority of animal-assisted interactions incorporating only dogs or horses. While these species are highly interactive, trainable and predictable, the behavioral repertoire of different species can offer significant opportunities to improve the therapeutic capacity of individual sessions.

Consider, for example, an animal-assisted educational application designed to improve adolescent boys’ reading scores. Boys of this age may be more motivated to read about reptiles and arachnids than common household pets. Selecting dogs for this group because the organization only works with dogs may reduce progress toward participant-specific goals. Furthermore, including a toy poodle in this application because the volunteer available at that time or the educator has a toy poodle can result in an equally ineffective application.

Human capacity to realistically assess the specific content of animal/participant interactions and to respond ethically to the continued engagement of those animals has not kept pace with these new applications. Providers are increasingly required to demonstrate a direct connection between participant-specific goals and animal contact; nevertheless, there has been relatively little attention paid to how to create or alter the animal interactions for the betterment of the participants (Katcher, 2000). Take for example, an incident that occurred when an alternative high school contracted with a local therapeutic riding center to conduct a vaulting program for eight adolescent boys to reduce aggression. This mental health application failed to meet participant goals in large part because the participants were identified to participate in the vaulting program rather than identifying the animal-assisted interactions based on participant goals.

More specifically, social workers contracted with the riding center because of its availability. In turn, the largest horse available at the riding center was the vaulting horse. The boys, however, were an average of 100 to 150 pounds overweight, and were inner city youth who represented a number of different ethnic backgrounds. None of the boys had ever seen a horse nor were they interested in learning to vault. In  

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2 In vaulting, movements such as those found in men’s gymnastics on a stationary horse are carried out on a moving horse.
considering the goals of the participants as well as cultural and historical connections for the participants, one can see that animal interaction consisting of gymnastics on horses was not an appropriate match to the needs of the participants. The development of a canine weight pulling program may have been more successful because it would have provided the boys with dogs that modeled the stature needed in their neighborhood and weight training is a relevant activity within their world.

From this perspective, it can be seen that the practice of utilizing available animals and volunteer handlers for animal-assisted applications results in the preselection of animals based on factors that may have nothing to do with the most effective and efficient approach to the participants’ goals. It is crucial, therefore, to examine and compare how the innate behaviors of animals can be effectively harnessed to support and improve application goals.

Behavior patterns are vastly different between carnivorous and non-carnivorous animals. The fact that rabbits and guinea pigs need to eat more frequently than dogs may actually enhance their role in a setting with a goal of increasing patients’ nurturing skills. In the same way, these animals require handling and techniques that can accommodate the animal’s frequent need to eliminate.

Innate behaviors such as the degree of physical contact, engagement with humans, and eye contact can be present in animals that do not possess high levels of performance skill. Likewise, these innate behaviors do not necessarily exist in every well-behaved animal that performs well for people other than its owner/handler. These specific skills and intrinsic behaviors relate to application and must be defined and considered in animal selection processes. An accurate assessment of species, breed, and individual capacity for work in animal-assisted applications can make a significant difference in participant outcomes.

This form of task analysis is common to other animal “occupations.” Take, for example, the canine “occupation” of tactical dogs. “Tactical dog” refers to dogs that work with military, law enforcement, and support personnel in a professional capacity. Within the realm of tactical dogs, there are many applications, such as narcotics detection, trailing, wilderness search and rescue, among others. The National Tactical Police Dog Association (NTPDA) has developed specific detailed behavioral expectations for dogs working within each application as well as a detailed process for evaluating tactical dogs and handlers. After meeting prerequisites, each handler and dog team must demonstrate specific tasks relating to specific goals in a reality-based test in an environment designed to include the unpredictable elements a team will likely encounter. There are specific behaviors relating to each task, and specific tasks relating to each job description.

In an interview with the second author, Brice Cavanaugh, a member of the board of directors for NTPDA, the importance of reality-based evaluations to introduce the elements of unpredictability in the work in which the dogs and their handlers will be engaged was emphasized. Cavanaugh noted that dogs work without equipment while being evaluated to assess the behaviors they are likely to revert to in stressful situations. Cavanaugh feels strongly that animal selection is the key to success and believes selection should first relate to a dog’s capacity for a specific job, with initial training emphasizing capacity and then reining in drive with control.
He looks to different breeds of dogs with different intrinsic talents for different aspects of tactical work and suggests that people should embrace what makes different breeds of dogs different. For example, he stated his dog of choice to train for free ranging explosives detection would be a German Shorthaired Pointer, but his dog of choice to train for tasks involving bite work would be a Belgian Malinois.

Furthermore, one commonality, he feels, between dogs currently selected for animal-assisted interactions and tactical canine selection made by volunteers is a lack of understanding of ways in which (human) job needs relate to the activities of the dogs. Cavanaugh referred to people who volunteer with their pets (his term within this context) in search and rescue efforts as hobbyists. A second commonality Cavanaugh suggested is that hobbyists often try to make their pet into something it isn’t. Rather, Cavanaugh explains, dogs should be trained within their capacity by manipulating their natural drives and desires, and then they are reined in with control. Through manipulation of nature, dogs do not consider their tasks to be “work.” Thus, stress caused by time should not become an issue if the dog has a strong internal desire to perform its task. If tasks are inherent, working lives of dogs are long. For example, the successful dog for explosives detection work is the dog that is inherently driven to hunt and range. For this dog, job success is more likely because it can be given something (different) to hunt and then it can be taught range work to find it. Furthermore, dogs and their handlers are evaluated annually because court cases depend on annual recertification.

In the same way, Jan Spink, founder of the New Harmony® Institute, developed the Equine Behavioral Profile System (EBPS)—a system to test for baseline performance objectives for horses engaged in animal-assisted applications. Spink writes that fundamental performance objectives must be identified in order to fairly assess the performance of potential and active therapy horses. She notes that this practice helps “minimize the influence of arbitrary or subjective preferences or discrepancies that have occurred” through the use of donated horses (p. 139). She further notes that performance objectives can be systematically or sequentially arranged and defined in terms of replicable tasks and subtasks to enhance selection accuracy.

The EBPS selection procedure consists of three parts, which include Objects, Position Changes, and Backriding. Each part includes a behavioral screening scale that rates the horse’s ability to cope with the real-life challenges presented in the course of the test. Most importantly, the EBPS defines and ranks the horse’s response to each item and to the overall test. Thus, evaluators have a clear understanding of what behavior from the horse is acceptable for work in specific participant-specific applications.

### 7.5 Development of a job description for animal-assisted applications

As animal-assisted applications expand to address a widening range of participant-specific goals it will be imperative to develop clear, measurable performance objectives for the handlers and animals engaged in this work. Effective selection procedures will require more than value judgments. In other words, by considering
specific performance criteria, medical, psychological, and educational professionals can best determine the fit between the team and participant-specific goals.

Measurability requires clarity and specificity of an outcome. Determining whether or not a rabbit will be a good therapy animal is more difficult than scoring the length of time a rabbit will stay in its basket while being passed between two people. The performance objective requiring the rabbit to stay in the basket for a specified amount of time despite movement of the basket is not only clearer than a more fluid notion of a “good” therapy rabbit; it also tests an expectation of the real-life application.

Weiss and Greenberg (1997) recently found that a dog’s success in most commonly used selection test items for service work did not predict later success as a service dog. Success as a service dog is less obvious and is a value-laden judgment rather than predicting whether or not a dog will learn certain commands to a prescribed level of accuracy and response time. In addition, Serpell and Hsu (2001) reported on a new method to test dogs for service dog work; however, the applicability of this evaluation to therapy dogs has not been investigated.

In a process similar to the selection procedures employed for tactical dogs are the ways in which many service/assistance dogs are trained and developed to perform tasks specific to the individual with whom they will be partnered, before going to live and work with that person. A dog that guides a person with a visual impairment does not have the same job description as a dog that alerts a mother with limited ability to hear her baby crying. Beyond training that targets specific tasks, these animals must demonstrate the capacity to perform their jobs.

Applying this approach requires the identification of performance outcomes expected in at least broad categories. Similar to the EBPS medical, psychological and educational applications could identify the most critical skills required by animals working in a particular application. While the specific details of the performance outcomes will vary with the specific setting, defining such task expectations enables the handler and professional to determine whether or not the task can be managed. By defining how the animal’s presence or interactions will result in progress toward participant-specific goals, selection procedures can be targeted toward identifying the characteristics or behaviors that have a likelihood of affecting the stated outcomes.

Central to any job description for animal-assisted applications is a clear performance outcome related to the duration, response, and type of physical contact expected of the animal. This is a task routinely expected but rarely defined in selection procedures.

7.6 Capacity for work

Proxemics is the study of personal space and the degree of separation that individuals maintain between each other in social situations. Each species has its own rules relating to personal territory. Animals participating in animal-assisted interactions are no exception. Within each personal territory, there are zones (Figure 7.1). The zone at which an individual is first aware of another is the public zone. From there one enters the social zone. Although it is permissible to be in another’s social zone, it is the non-verbal communication between the individuals that will make the situation either
intimidating or acceptable. Moving still closer brings an individual into another’s personal zone, which can be read either as a sign of favor or manipulation. Closer than the personal is the intimate zone, which includes contact. An individual is overwhelmingly aware of another within one’s intimate zone. Species maintain rigid rules of communication within this proximity. Ignoring or being unaware of those rules can be perceived as disrespect or intimidation. It is crucial to note that the great majority of animal-assisted interaction programs encourage participants to interact with animals in this zone yet rarely define how differences in terms of the animal’s response may affect participant outcomes.

Whenever the barrier of an intimate zone is crossed, animals respond by signaling. These signals are obvious announcements of respect, appeasement, fear, defensiveness or aggression; yet animals in animal-assisted applications are routinely required to work with people for whom their language is completely foreign. The handler’s ability to interpret and respond to each animal’s important communiqués is a critical factor in the outcome of an interaction.

**Figure 7.1** Personal territory zones. Graphic and corresponding text first published in *Therapy Dogs Today: Their Gifts, Our Obligation*. © 2004. Reprinted with permission of Kris Butler and Funpuddle Publishing Associates.
Touching is the most intimate act of communication. Touching is an integral part of almost every animal-assisted interaction and, while no one would suggest that people stop petting animals during animal-assisted interactions, it is crucial that the animals are allowed to seek out this intimate contact. Animals that obediently tolerate an invasion of their intimate space may become overwhelmed or stressed.

Particularly for small animals such as rabbits, guinea pigs, and tiny dogs, there are unique intrinsic vulnerabilities associated with being prey. Predators often hover over, swoop in, and grab their prey, carrying it off for consumption. Nature has endowed small prey animals with an intuitive sense of the seating arrangement at nature’s dinner table. Animal-assisted interactions routinely place a person or groups of people physically over an animal, in positions that suggest hovering, swooping, and grabbing at the animal. Warranted or not, animals’ bodies respond to their intuition and signal their levels of discomfort.

Body language enables any species to send messages, note reception of messages, break through defenses, and avoid conflict. The process of communication is complicated and becomes even more so when different species have different interpretations for the signals included in their vocabulary. Often humans do not recognize the signaling of an animal or misinterpret the signals as disinterest or disobedience; yet each signal is part of a message an animal might be trying to convey about personal territory. During animal-assisted interactions, people may behave in ways that inadvertently signal tension to animals.

A further advantage to developing precise performance expectations for animals involved in animal-assisted applications is that it encourages the development of a professional relationship with the animal. Again, the models used by law enforcement and military agencies in assessing dogs for tactical professional roles are instructive. In these roles, dogs are selected primarily for their abilities to perform specific tasks. Dogs that detect drugs in vehicles do not have the same job descriptions as dogs that search for explosives in buildings or dogs that search for people. The question of whether the dog is the handler’s favorite breed or makes a good companion for the handler’s children is a secondary consideration and in actuality has nothing to do with the dog’s performance of its “professional” duties.

In a similar vein, Rebecca O’Connor (2003) describes the relationship involved in working with a hunting hawk as a professional relationship much like the relationship that exists between a senior employee and employer. The commonality here is that like the tactical dog handler, there are specific expectations of the bird in terms of job performance. In both scenarios, the animal may be brilliantly successful in its career, a steady and consistent worker or one that needs constant supervision and correction.

The need for the development of a professional relationship between the handler and/or the medical, psychological or educational professional can alleviate the problems caused by the tendency for handlers to interpret animal behavior anthropomorphically. Handlers are frequently heard to exclaim that their dog “understands” the child’s fear of doctors or that horses always know what is best for people. While anthropomorphic interpretation may be a good strategy for some animal-assisted interactions, it is less useful in selecting animals working in animal-assisted applications.
Renowned paleo-biologist Stephen J. Gould noted, “We cannot avoid the language and knowledge of our own emotional experience when we describe a strikingly similar reaction observed in another species.” According to Marc Bekoff (2009), “Anthropomorphism endures because it is a necessity, but it also must be done carefully, consciously, empathetically, and from the point of view of the animal, always asking, ‘what is it like to be that individual.’ We must make every attempt to maintain the animal’s point of view. We must repeatedly ask, ‘What is that individual’s experience?’” (p. 42).

To ensure quality, respectful programs it is critical that animals are never “used” in animal-assisted interactions, but treated as partners in a mutually respectful relationship. The needs of animals must always be considered, accommodated, and balanced with the needs of participants within the scope of animal-assisted interactions. The challenge is to accept and appreciate each animal for what it is designed by nature to be and not project our human images of “success” onto them. When people humanize the animal, it strips from the animal the very reason we love them. By cultivating the relationship with the animal first based on in its capacity as a professional and second as a pet or favorite horse, questions about job performance, health requirements and retirement can be met with less emotional challenge and more ethical consideration.

Today, one of the most important challenges facing the ethical incorporation of animals in medical, psychological and educational applications is a lack of awareness on the part of the people that work with them of the complex, stressful situations in which the animals are being expected to participate. Many of today’s animal-assisted interactions are stressful to animals, perhaps for no other reason than the huge shift from people and settings that would be normal for the species. The key is in determining whether an animal has the capacity to recover from the encroachment of strangers, cope comfortably in the environment, and respond appropriately to interactions. Animal-assisted interactions are not appropriate if the emotional or activity levels of targeted participant(s) are overwhelming to available animals. Spink (1993) remarks that the tester should be perceptive enough to avoid overwhelming the horse with too much or improperly presented stimuli as this may elicit a strong fight or flight response and teach the horse that these situations or objects are dangerous.

### 7.7 Handler recommendations

Effective interactions consist of handlers who appropriately present animals and animals that appropriately receive the participants with whom they are interacting. Animals that possess and demonstrate unique behaviors have a talent or capacity for animal-assisted interactions. Animal contact may facilitate participant goals by contributing to feelings of safety, comfort, and connection. The behaviors that are required to make people feel safe, comfortable, and connected to animals that interact with them remain consistent. However, animals’ and handlers’ abilities to demonstrate specific behaviors depend on environmental factors, as well as team skills and talents.
The handler’s role in animal-assisted interaction is to present the animal. Presenting an animal involves preparation (training, veterinary care, grooming), assessments prior to every intervention, moment-to-moment assessments, and actively working as the animal’s advocate. Presentation skill includes a handler’s knowledgeable and proactive handling to enhance the animal’s ability to meet formal or informal participant or program goals, and a basic knowledge of communication skills to enhance human-to-human interactions. Components of the handler’s role include the ability to:

- demonstrate appropriate treatment of people and animals
- demonstrate appropriate social skills (eye contact, smiles, confident posture, conversation) needed for interacting with people in animal-assisted interaction
- prepare for, conduct, and conclude a visit
- demonstrate handling methods that encourage participant-specific goals
- maintain confidentiality
- demonstrate pleasant, calm, and friendly reaction to and attitude towards animals during various tasks and scenarios
- demonstrate proactive (rather than reactive) animal handling skills
- act as animal’s advocate in all situations, protecting and respecting the animal’s needs
- effectively read the animal’s cues (stress, excitement, etc.) and act accordingly.

During animal-assisted interactions, the animal’s role is to “receive” the person or people with whom the animal is interacting. The process of being received is what gives people the perception that there is a connection or bond between themselves and the animal. It is primarily that perception which motivates people to participate in therapy, learning, discussion, or other targeted activities. Animals that initiate physical contact, remain engaged, make eye contact, respect personal boundaries, and allow their behaviors to be redirected convey that a connection exists (Butler, 2004b). Simply being able to cause an animal to make eye contact by saying its name is enough to create a sense of connection.

Animal behaviors that reduce the perception of a connection include disinterest, reluctance to engage, disregard for personal boundaries, and any conduct that might be interpreted as aggressive or stress related. The reasons behind an animal’s behavior are never as important as the effects of that behavior on the people being visited. For example, some animals vocalize when they are excited, but the issue is not so much what the animal means as whether the specific participant feels threatened by the behavior. While friendliness and confidence are necessary qualities for animal-assisted interactions, animals must also respect personal boundaries. Jumping, pawing, and licking (beyond the few quick and respectful face-to-face calming licks) can seem intrusive to participants.

Animals must be confident enough in their interactions with people to accept occasional rough handling due to arthritic joints or spastic muscles, they must be able to tolerate uncontrolled vocalizations from strangers, and they must be focused on people with whom they are working. This special relationship expands the handlers’ responsibility for the animals’ safety and comfort.

Author Kris Butler writes in her book *Therapy Dogs Today: Their Gifts, Our Obligation* (2004b) that animal-assisted interactions can be viewed within the context
of balance and compensation (Figure 7.2). This concept of balance can inform animal-assisted interactions. As children, we learned about balance and compensation on the playground. With a teeter-totter for a teacher, young children quickly figure out that it is not just size and strength that matter. The key to success on a teeter-totter lies in the ability and willingness of participants to compensate to achieve balance.

Participants in animal-assisted interactions include the animal and handler as a team on one end of the scale, and the environmental factor on the other. When teams and environments are in balance, interactions can reasonably be expected to succeed.

Compensation can be viewed as either adding an equivalent to one side or decreasing/eliminating an undesired effect on the other. A dog might possess a talent for receiving young children, and feel completely at ease listening to one child at a time reading out loud. Yet it is possible for the same dog to be uncomfortable walking through the crowded, noisy halls of the school in which it works. The other students will make their presence known if given a chance, and so the students and their unsupervised (and so highly unpredictable) behavior must be considered on the environmental side of the balance scale. An example of compensation would be for the handler to walk the dog through the school only after the students were already in class or, if the dog were small, to use a carrier to transport the dog through the school.

Butler also points out that although they work together as a team, each handler and animal comes with individual levels of comfort, talent, skill, experience, and confidence in each other. Each team performs its own balancing act between the animal and handler on its “team” end of the balance scale.
Comfort levels are dependent on each team member’s individual ability to cope with the environment. Comfort is mostly an animal-related issue, simply because handlers do not repeatedly take the team into environments where the handler feels uncomfortable.

The most essential element an animal and handler possess is talent, yet it is often overlooked. Talent is a natural endowment. Some people are talented piano players; others simply play the piano. Talented handlers are able to deal with the reality of their current situation and act as their animals’ advocates. Talented animals are able to demonstrate behaviors previously described as being therapeutic.

Skill refers to a team’s trained or acquired behaviors. High levels of skill never compensate for absence of talent. Some animals can be trained to persevere in spite of distractions and sensory bombardment. Just because some animals are willing to tolerate overwhelming environments does not mean people have license to exploit the animals. Sometimes an environment imposes too much upon an animal.

The perception of a strong moment-to-moment connection between the handler and the animal increases everyone’s confidence in the team. Handlers who talk in normal everyday tones and who make contact, either by touching or speaking, with their animals frequently, demonstrate the bond that exists between themselves and their animals. Handler skill should reflect a loving partnership with the animal, while subtly suggesting that the handler is indeed in control and can easily redirect the animal’s behavior when necessary (Butler, 2004a).

For example, a participant might not be able to identify that the handler kept a gentle hand on the dog, scratching behind the ears, during most of the animal-assisted interaction, but the result is that the participant is left with a positive feeling about a strong, respectful relationship between the animal and handler. When a handler physically places the animal into position and then does not touch the animal again except to reposition, it leaves an entirely different impression. Both gruff tone of voice and physical pushing/pulling can be distracting and create negative judgments about the relationship between handler and animal.

Together, an animal and a handler create a uniquely balanced team; but they do not visit in a vacuum. Within each facility are environmental elements that affect each team’s talent and comfort levels, test each team’s skill level, and draw from each team’s experiences differently. An animal’s and handler’s abilities to demonstrate specific behaviors depend on environmental factors, as well as team skills and talents. The best way to determine if teams are appropriate for specific environments is by assessing their behaviors within those environments.

No matter where teams work, each environment includes a targeted population, specific goals for that population, a specific number of staff people involved, a total population, and perhaps visitor activity, other animals, and other activity. Assessments made through careful observation, not necessarily a formal process, will best determine whether an animal and handler team can remain in balance within a specific environment.

Staff participation carries more weight than any other element on the environmental side of the balance scale. Effective staffing mitigates risks associated with unpredictable populations and enables teams to address complex goals. Skill becomes
an important issue when goals are complex and specific. Team skills must be adequate to meet the goals of the program. Gentle, talented animals without high levels of trained skill can provide effective opportunities for communication and socialization.

Some participants are not appropriate for hands-on animal-assisted interaction with available animals, no matter how tolerant or talented the animals might be. Animal-assisted interaction is not appropriate for people who might harm the available animals or handlers, even inadvertently. Staff’s role includes screening to determine which participants are appropriate for animal-assisted interactions. For example, individual children who sit in chairs or on the floor are less threatening to small animals than groups of children who are playing throughout the environment. Sometimes balance is achieved through selection of larger species of animals to compensate for more reactive populations.

Environments that facilitate animal-assisted interaction often include other animals, including residential animals, multiple visiting animals, visiting family pets, or service dogs. Some animals are, at best, unable to maintain focus in the presence of other animals and, at worst, aggressive toward or fearful of other animals. Balance is dependent upon the working animal’s ability to disregard other animals in the environment, or staff’s ability to limit the access of other animals to selected areas of the facility.

Medical, psychological or educational professionals may play different roles in the process of delivering animal-assisted applications depending on the delivery model used. Brooks (2006) names these the diamond and triangle models. In the diamond model, the medical, psychological or educational professional works in partnership with the animal handler. This creates an interactive structure in which the handler and the professional must be sure of professional and communication boundaries and pathways in order to ensure smooth interactions. This model is most often utilized when large animals are involved such as horses or when the animal may be working at a distance from the participant.

In the second model, the triangle model, the medical, educational or psychological professional works without the assistance of an animal handler. Also referred to as dual-role handlers, these professionals most often work with their own animals, within their professional environment. The triangle model requires the professional to assume the roles and responsibilities on both sides of the balance scale. This delivery model of animal-assisted applications is most often used when the nature of the session requires maximum privacy and confidentiality (i.e. disclosure of incest or childhood sexual assault) or when the animal’s role is primarily passive in nature such as helping an individual child improve their reading skills. The animals working in this delivery model must be skilled to the degree that they behave appropriately even in the absence of direct handler attention. Length of workdays and workweeks are huge comfort-level issues for these animals. This model can put more pressure on the animal and requires careful consideration of the selection, training, and scheduling of animals who will work in this model.

Sometimes there is no capacity for balance. Ethical handlers will remove their animals any time the environment is stacked against them. When it becomes impossible for an animal to work comfortably within the environment(s) available to the animal, it is the handler’s responsibility to retire the animal from animal-assisted
interactions. When animals that live in the therapeutic setting such as resident pets or animals living on therapeutic farms are unable to cope with the environment in which they live, it is imperative that the handler or advocate rehome these animals or, if rehoming is not realistic, consider euthanasia.

Handlers make up 50% of working animal-assisted interaction teams, but carry 100% of team responsibility for the process. The significance of adequate handler training and screening cannot be overemphasized. Handlers’ experience, skill, and health are equally as important as animal assessment to minimize risk to all who participate in animal-assisted interactions. Handler competence and understanding ways in which the animal’s capacity relates to the human participant’s goals directly affect the degree of effectiveness within animal-assisted applications.

7.8 Summary

Today, animal-assisted interactions are never alike. Therefore, it is critical to go beyond training methods and one-time approaches developed years ago to screen animal/handler teams for the brief nursing home and hospital visiting programs. Typical animal-assisted interaction programs go beyond merely offering participant’s opportunities to have contact with animals. Animals have been moved to the front-lines of successful treatment and education plans because of their capacity to motivate participants to engage in a wide range of physical, cognitive, psychosocial, communication, and educational applications.

It is clear that there is much more to learn about the selection, training, and care of animals involved in animal-assisted interactions. Expectations for animals involved in these settings have changed dramatically in the last ten years. However, the failure of providers to define precise expectations of the specific content of interactions or what the animal is expected to do in animal-assisted applications continues to limit the acceptance of these applications by the health and education industries.

Animal-assisted applications are still considered by the majority of professionals as non-traditional interventions that do not conform to the long-established or inherited way of thinking or acting. In the professional ethics and legal fields, approved practice is generally based on prevailing standards of conduct engaged in by ordinary, reasonable, and prudent practitioners with the same or similar training (Reamer, 2006).

Innovations are vitally important to every profession. Advances in knowledge, based on an integration of precise conceptualization and the results of evaluative research, are essential elements in professionals’ efforts to refine and enhance their ability to help people. Innovations such as animal-assisted applications, however, also carry risks (Schantz, 1990; Walter-Toews, 1993). In order to justify any risk associated with animal-assisted applications, health care and education providers must demonstrate that measurable value has occurred as a result of these innovations. Merely providing anecdotal reports will not satisfy the need to support these applications by research and evaluation data (Beck and Katcher, 2003).

To do this it will be necessary to create precise descriptions of the role of the animal and the tasks expected of the animal within different applications. In this
process, the handlers’ emotional connection with the animal must be moved to the background and the participant’s connection to the animal must be brought to the foreground through the use of objective measures and observation. In order to realistically determine the effect of animal contact on participants in a variety of medical, psychological, and educational applications, the participant animal relationship must be prioritized. In other words, it is time to select animals for work in animal-assisted applications where their professional role is primary. Whether or not these animals are then invited to live within their human partners’ families is a secondary consideration. Cavanaugh stated it well when he recommended that in selecting animals for work in animal-assisted applications providers should “choose animals with the thought that lives depend on the choice.” Do we owe the animals or participants anything less?

References

Cavanaugh, B., personal communication, CAVK9 • 1619 Hwy 11 • Hazel Green, WI 53811 • 888.SWAT.K9S (792.8597) • www.CAVK9.com


