



# CISM AND CANINES: THE ROLE OF CANINE INTERVENTIONS IN ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

Schools have traditionally been regarded as multifaceted purpose institutions serving as centers for learning, fostering formative social experiences, and providing safe havens where students are surrounded by the support of teachers, administrators, counselors, and their peers. When students encounter traumatic events in their lives, it is often these individuals to whom they turn first for support.

There is a burgeoning interest in a field that is attracting heightened attention: the integration of Animal Assisted interventions as a complementary component to existing school counseling and support services. This entails augmenting existing resources through an innovative Animal Assisted School Counseling (AASC) model.

This article aims to address pivotal events that influence school communities and society. It will investigate the valuable function of an Animal Assisted School Counseling model in enriching education, offering solace, fostering support, aiding recovery, and fostering resilience in individuals and communities. Additionally, it will explore alternative methods such as Animal Assisted Education in which canines can be employed within educational settings

to help students cope with anxiety, improve behavior, and integrate with the curriculum (Vokatis & Ormiston, 2023).

## CRITICAL INCIDENTS AFFECTING SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

A critical incident is defined as "any event which has a stressful impact sufficient enough to overwhelm the usually effective coping skills of either an individual or a group. These are typically sudden, powerful events outside of the range of ordinary human experiences" (Mitchell & Everly, 1993).

School-based critical incidents are defined as events, either man-made or natural disasters, that disrupt the normal functioning of a school. When these occur, there is an indelible impact on staff and students. A well-prepared response, focused on psychological first aid and support has the potential to bring forth immediate and effective resources to help mitigate negative consequences. Animal Assisted School Counseling is one such model that has demonstrated a positive impact in the aftermath of traumatic events.

## SCHOOL VIOLENCE AND MASS SHOOTINGS IN THE UNITED STATES

Undoubtedly, among the most vulnerable members of our society are our children.

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Unfortunately, all too frequently in recent times, the safety of our schools and universities has been compromised. When malevolence infiltrates what should be a sacred institution, it leaves behind a trail of tragic loss of lives, devastating injuries, shattered communities, and individuals deeply scarred by the violence.

Although the earliest known school in the United States shooting traces back to the 1764 Pontiac School Rebellion massacre (K12 Academics, 2023), the 1999 Columbine High School shooting was a watershed moment as the overwhelming media coverage caused the country to collectively realize that no setting is immune from the violent intentions of individuals determined to unleash terrorism and prey on the defenseless. The mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas on May 24, 2022; The Covenant School shooting in Nashville, Tennessee March 27, 2023; and others are recent examples that further underscore that, despite our increased understanding of attack patterns and perpetrator profiles, and notwithstanding advancements in security measures, there is still much work to be done to prevent and respond to such incidents.

Other forms of school violence can include a wide variety of acts, such as physical assault and battery, physical or noncontact aggression, bullying (including cyberbullying), fighting, robbery, unwanted sexual contact, weapon possession, and verbal threats. The notion that these types of violence can occur virtually anywhere, sows an additional undercurrent of stress and anxiety that has a negative impact on somewhat fragile student psyches.

## **TRAUMATIC LIFE EVENTS**

There are additional traumatic events that can impact school communities. Among high school students, unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death, followed by suicide (Ivey-Stephenson et al. 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a period referred to as the "lost years," marked by increased isolation, loneliness, and a reliance on distorted social media for social connection. Consequently, suicidal ideation and the tragic loss of students to suicide significantly increased.

Schools play a pivotal role in not only intervening to identify and prevent suicide but also compassionately facilitating support following the death of or serious injury to a student by any means. Responding appropriately is crucial to ensuring that everyone affected—family, friends, and the school community—receives the right type and amount of support.

In the aftermath of school community tragedies, hope emerges alongside opportunities for healing. Animal Assisted School Counseling, which utilizes Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI), such as Animal Assisted Crisis Response (AACR) and Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) interventions, is an effective means of supplying much-needed support.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT**

The impact of the afore-described traumatic events can materialize in many ways. Common manifestations of victimization include loneliness, low self-esteem depression, anxiety, suicidality, headache, self-harm, somatic symptoms, fear, low social support, dating violence victimization, and psychotic symptoms. (National Institute

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of Justice, 2022). Further effects on staff include loss of connectedness, decreased job satisfaction, increased stress, and burnout (Turanovic & Siennick, 2022).

Post-traumatic grief can have a profound impact on students and staff and may give rise to new mental health issues or exacerbate existing conditions. Additionally, when suicide is a factor, addressing other issues is imperative, including identifying students who may be at risk of following a similar path, known as suicidal ideation or suicide contagion.

Some states such as New Jersey have introduced legislation mandating that schools provide instruction including information on the physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms of grief; coping mechanisms and techniques for handling grief and loss; and resources available to students, including in-school support, mental health crisis support, and individual and group therapy (New Jersey State 220<sup>th</sup> Legislature, 2023). Animal Assisted School Counseling is a means to satisfy several provisions of these types of mandates.

## **ANIMAL ASSISTED INTERVENTIONS (AAI)**

Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) is a broad term commonly used to describe the utilization of various species of animals in diverse manners beneficial to humans. Animal Assisted therapy, education, school counseling, and crisis response are examples of types of Animal Assisted intervention (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2022). AAI can occur in various settings, such as healthcare facilities, educational institutions, businesses, or places of worship.

AAIs have been found to be effective in helping people cope with trauma, including after-school violence (Brelsford et al. (2017). AAIs intentionally incorporate the power of the human-animal bond into the therapeutic process, promoting connection with oneself and others. Research findings indicate that AAIs can reduce student stress and build connections within the school, strengthening student response to school-based interventions and providing a safe and supportive environment (Lane & Zavada, 2013)

## **CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT**

CISM is a comprehensive, integrative, multicomponent crisis intervention system with a longstanding history of effective interactions with individuals and groups in the aftermath of a critical incident. These interventions range from the pre-crisis phase through acute-crisis and into the post-crisis phase. Interventions may be applied to individuals, small functional groups, large groups, families, organizations, and even communities (Everly & Mitchell, 1997). The positive impact of CISM programs on building resilience and promotion of healing has been empirically validated (Everly & Boyle, 1997). CISM supports those who have been involved in a critical incident to share their experiences, vent their emotions, learn about stress reactions and symptoms, and obtain a referral for further help if required.

## **ANIMAL ASSISTED CRISIS RESPONSE (AACR)**

Animal Assisted Crisis Response (AACR) is a form of Animal Assisted Intervention in which “the utilization of certified canine-and-

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handler teams assisting in crisis interventions to support the psychological and physiological needs of individuals affected by, and responding to, crises and disasters in complex, unpredictable environments.

These interventions provide needed respite during periods of unimaginable turmoil” (Tedeschi & Jenkins, 2019). Following traumatic events, there is a natural defense mechanism to withdraw and isolate, but there is ample evidence to support the strategy of implementing AACR interactions.

Dogs and their handlers can forge a collective rapport that proves invaluable in the immediate aftermath of an event, instilling a profound sense of safety and support through their reassuring presence. Additionally, they play a crucial role in promoting security, comfort, and stability, effectively grounding individuals back to reality and nurturing resilience in those who have experienced a critical incident (Chandler, 2012).

Significant research has explored the psychological and physiological effects of canines on those who have encountered traumatic events. The interaction between humans and dogs triggers the release of neurochemicals, including oxytocin, in both the circulatory system and the brain (Bua, 2013). Oxytocin serves as a buffer against the stress response and cortisol secretion (the stress hormone) and plays a role in emotions, trust, and bonding. This neurochemical impact contributes to an enhanced positive interaction between the canine intervention team and those they engage with.

Research within the realm of CISM and AACR interventions underscores the capacity of animals, especially dogs, to act as catalysts or facilitators in establishing

"affiliation[s] and relations in social interactions" (Guéquen & Ciccotti, 2008). With the added sense of safety provided by a canine presence, the AACR team can advocate for CISM interventions, encouraging students and staff in need to accept needed interventions.

Teams provide education on a myriad of topics, including active shooter, and partner with school counselors to deliver education and training on difficult topics such as interpersonal violence and suicide. Teams share messaging on resilience and the support available following traumatic incidents, including critical incident stress debriefings and Animal Assisted Crisis Response.



Canines serve as a bridge between the isolation following a critical incident and the connection to trained interventionists, facilitating access to compassionate support. Individually, both the CISM and AACR interventions exhibit positive impacts. The combination of these modalities harnesses the powerful synergy of both, presenting an innovative approach that has gained widespread acceptance in practice by first responders and healthcare communities. The lessons learned from experience within these

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fields have led to the development of a unique model for Animal Assisted School Counseling and interventions following traumatic events.

## **ANIMAL ASSISTED SCHOOL COUNSELING (AASC) PARTNERSHIP WITH SCHOOL COUNSELORS**

Animal Assisted school counseling is an innovative AAI approach that incorporates the therapeutic presence of animals, typically canines, into the school counseling environment to aid in occupational therapy, social and emotional skills development, speech and language therapy, and counseling. This method recognizes the unique bond between humans and animals and leverages it to create a supportive and comforting atmosphere for students.



Certified canine intervention teams in schools have been proven to be beneficial for both students and staff. These teams help alleviate stress, anxiety, and emotional barriers, fostering a more open and trusting relationship between students and staff. Canines offer a non-judgmental and

empathetic presence, making it easier for students to express themselves and engage in school activities. Integrating canines into school counseling practices can offer valuable teaching moments for students, particularly when addressing topics such as personal responsibility, feelings, self-control, attachment, and grief. By providing touch, affection, affirmation, and acceptance, animals can offer a safe space for connection and relaxation, enhancing the learning environment for everyone involved. (Morris, 2023).

The Animal Assisted Intervention diamond method is used by school counselors to facilitate the intervention. Canine handlers are not expected to lead discussions on social and emotional topics. Instead, the dog's presence provides a safe and nurturing environment that offers unique opportunities for touch and affection. For example, a student could be asked to read a book about grief or adoption, leading to a meaningful conversation. The counselor facilitating the intervention can use characters in the book to discuss ways of coping with challenging situations and encourage students to reflect on how the book parallels their own experiences.

Certified teams of canines and handlers establish trusted relationships with students and staff during regular visits to schools and participation in school events. When critical incidents occur, these familiar teams respond by partnering with school resource teams to offer support.

## **ANIMAL ASSISTED EDUCATION (AAE)**

Animal Assisted Education is a form of Animal Assisted intervention (AAI) designed

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for children and young adults. A professional such as a teacher, together with a trained canine, aims to develop academic, social-emotional, and cognitive functions within the context of children's education. This approach includes play and educational components, as well as reciprocal physical interaction between the child and the animal in a naturalistic manner (Verhoeven, et al. 2023).

Several recent studies have suggested that dogs can increase motivation and improve reading achievement. One study revealed significantly increased motivation to read in the presence of a dog, while other research indicated that interaction with dogs reduced stress during exam situations. Additionally, findings highlighted dogs' calming influence in elementary education environments (Verhoeven, et al. 2023).



Additionally, the use of Animal Assisted Education (AAE) has been shown to increase social interaction between students and teachers. Elementary school teachers reported that children were more likely to share their emotions, resulting in increased empathy and improved social-emotional

functioning. Studies have also found that relational skills increased.

The concept of play also plays an important role in education. The significance of "play" was specifically mentioned. Furthermore, several studies highlighted the casual, playful, and relaxed nature of the intervention. Dogs can serve as mediators between a child and a teacher, especially for children who have difficulties connecting with adults. (Verhoeven, et al. 2023).

One effective method for integrating the classroom involves using visualization to stimulate creative writing. Students are encouraged to imagine the life and experiences of a dog and then asked to create and illustrate a narrative based on their imagination (Vokatis & Ormiston (2023).

An example of integrating the canine into a math lesson is teaching place value. The class can meet with the canine and its handler and ask general questions to eventually determine the canine's weight. The teacher can then use the canine's weight to explain place value. For example, if the canine weighs 53 lbs, the 5 is in the tens place, meaning the dog is 5 tens. The teacher can use other canines' weights for more examples (Vokatis & Ormiston, 2023).

## SUCCESS STORIES

Crisis Response Canines, a national organization at the forefront of standardizing AASC integration, has experienced numerous successful instances of adoption. In a recent case, a young boy who had been nonverbal after witnessing a traumatic event found solace through canine therapy. Despite previous unsuccessful attempts by counselors and mental health professionals to initiate communication, the introduction of a therapy

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dog proved transformative. Beginning with simple questions like "Do you like dogs?" and progressing to activities such as walking the dog, the boy gradually opened up. This interaction not only reignited communication but also led the boy to introduce the canine to his peers, fostering a positive social dynamic.

In another scenario, teams are frequently summoned to address sudden student deaths. A school district grappling with a cluster of student suicides collaborated with school counselors to integrate canines into the grieving process. The canines engaged with students and staff individually and in group settings, providing support as they navigated through the complexities of grief.

## **IMPLEMENTING A PROGRAM**

Legislation has been proposed in New Jersey to integrate therapy canines into schools. However, there are concerns about the program structure and benefits of such a program. For the safety and effectiveness of such a program, it is crucial to collaborate with a reliable and certified Animal Assisted Intervention organization. This organization provides standards, certification, general liability insurance coverage, and consistent evaluations of the dog's health, temperament, stress levels, and overall suitability. Adhering to established protocols and guidelines is also essential to ensure positive interactions.

Partnering with a certified Animal Assisted Intervention organization can be highly advantageous for schools. By doing so, the handler can focus solely on the dog's behavior and respond accordingly. Not all canines and handlers are comfortable working with children in a school environment, so matching the right team with the school's specific needs is crucial. Dogs

that are ideal for hospices or libraries may not be suitable for a busy school, and handlers who dislike working with children may not be a good fit. Detailed planning is necessary for the intervention's success, including preparing documentation such as confidentiality agreements and permission forms. Since the information presented in sessions may be sensitive, school counselors should discuss disclosures with all participants.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the integration of Animal Assisted School Counseling (AASC), Animal Assisted Crisis Response (AACR), and Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) interventions emerges as a powerful and innovative approach to providing support in the school communities. The symbiotic relationship between humans and canines plays a pivotal role in fostering resilience, promoting healing, and creating a supportive environment. The physiological, psychological, and social benefits documented in recent research underscore the transformative potential of Animal Assisted Intervention programs, urging schools to consider the integration of animals into counseling programs. Ultimately, the presence of certified canine intervention teams has shown promising success stories, illustrating the profound positive impact on students and staff, contributing to enhanced social-emotional well-being and academic success.

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