Effects of dog-assisted education on physical and communicative skills in children with severe and multiple disabilities: A pilot study

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Abstract
Animal-assisted interventions have shown promising benefits in different populations such as children with cerebral palsy or autism spectrum disorder. Human–animal interaction leads to different physical, cognitive, and emotional benefits in the child. The aim of the current pilot study was to evaluate the effects of a dog-assisted education program on the postural, oculomotor, linguistic and autonomy dimensions in children affected by severe and multiple disabilities. Fourteen children aged 3–12 years and affected by intellectual and physical disabilities participated in a dog-assisted program consisted of 12 sessions. The intervention involved different types of activities, exercises, and games with the dogs. A strict protocol to ensure animal wellbeing and avoid any type of stress or fatigue was followed. Children who participated in the study improved their postural control, eye-motor coordination, expression of sensations and feelings, spontaneous interaction, autonomy, and confidence. However, these results must be taken with caution due to the lack of a control group and the heterogeneity of the participants.

Author keywords
Animal-assisted educational program; Animal-assisted intervention; Disability; Dogs