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This scholarly project reflects individualized, original research conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Occupational Therapy Doctoral Program, The University of Toledo.
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to discover the benefits of engaging in rescue animal training for at-risk youth, though the photovoice method. The data was collected through the responses of youth participating in Teacher’s Pet: Dogs and Kids Learning Together in Oakland County, Michigan. Five adolescent boys took pictures over the period of one month and shared their experiences. Six themes emerged from the analysis of the photographs and discussions. The themes were gaining patience, forming an attachment to the dog, wanting to better themselves or make better choices, helping others or volunteering at Teacher’s Pet, teaching, and relating to the dog. Taken together, these themes provide evidence of a significant impact that a program such as this can have on at-risk youth. These findings suggest that the youth who engage in the Teacher’s Pet program gained more from the program than they anticipated when they applied to participate. This study suggests that this approach is consistent with the American Occupational Therapy Association’s mission to provide alternative occupations to the choices available to and made by at-risk youth. Adding the unique role of an occupational therapist to a similar program could enhance the outcomes and facilitate the progress of the youth. Future research should continue to enhance the knowledge of how caring for animals benefits people to expand this area and increase the number of programs that utilize this type of approach.
Introduction

There has always been a strong connection between human and animal. Our own classification within the animal kingdom forever binds us to our primitive roots and has served to strengthen our bond with our distant kin. From beasts of burden to household pets, humans have put animals to use in a variety of fashions. They not only improve our quality of life, but also improve our understanding of ourselves and our capabilities. Child psychologist Dr. Aubrey Fine (2010) describes animal-assisted interventions (AAI) as a modern approach for utilizing animal-human interactions for therapeutic outcomes.

AAI has been shown to have therapeutic benefit in a variety of populations. Banks and Banks (2002) found that residents in a long-term care facility who had past positive relationships with animals, as measured by the Demographic and Pet History Questionnaire (DPHQ), had reduced loneliness following from interaction with a dog in their rooms, as measured by the UCLA Loneliness Scale Version 3 (UCLA-LA). In a study of adults with serious mental illness, Wisdom and colleagues (2009) demonstrated positive outcomes from having pets. The participants felt as though the pets provided empathy, therapy, a means for social skills, family, self-efficacy, strengthening, and empowerment, as well as companionship. Having pets has also been used as a coping strategy for homeless youth. In a secondary analysis of a study conducted by Rew (2000), homeless adolescents described their pets as “companions that could provide safety, unconditional love, and a reason to keep going because they needed care in return” (p. 128). When these adolescents had nowhere else to turn, they relied on animals to help them through. The author suggested that the youths recognized the animals’ therapeutic value.

Beyond the companionship offered by having pets, the relationship also comes with caregiving responsibilities. Accountable pet owners provide basic needs such as shelter, food,
water, and veterinary care. In order to fully appreciate the companionship that pets provide, pet owners may go further in their caregiving to engage in play, exercise, and training with their pets. Evidence suggests that providing caregiving has therapeutic benefits. People who are the primary caregivers for family members with illnesses report that they feel motivated to better care for themselves in order to be able to provide care for their loved ones (Varma, 2011). In their unique book, *Attachment to Pets: An Integrative View of Human—Animal Relationships With Implications for Therapeutic Practice* Julius and colleagues (2013) explain the biological effects of attachment and caregiving in humans. They describe the autonomic nervous system and how oxytocin plays a role in the attachments made by humans. They discuss how dysfunctional attachment can lead to underdeveloped caregiving relationships and attachment. They suggest that animals can fill the gap of the attachment and caregiving issues and that animal-assisted therapy is capitalizing on this biological need of humans. Still, little to no empirical research has been done to show what the effect of caring for an animal in need has on at-risk youth.

**At-Risk Youth**

According to Mech et al. (1994), the term at risk is used to describe children who have been exposed to abuse, neglect, sexual exploitation, or parental neglect. A study by Solberg and colleagues (2007) found that high school students identified in at-risk groups were more likely to demonstrate a lack of connections to teachers and peers, academic self-efficacy, reported intrinsic motivation, and to have a greater exposure to direct and indirect violence than other students the same age.

A statement from the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) on youth violence (Goertz, 2008), states that youth violence is the leading cause of death in African
Americans ages 15-24 and the second leading cause of death in all youth of the same age. According to this statement, “violence consists of bullying, verbal threats, physical assault, domestic abuse, and gunfire” (Goertz, 2008, para 1). Many problems arise from this violent activity. Some of the main problems are “premature death, disability, and academic failure” (Goertz, 2008, para. 1). AOTA states that “risk factors that lead to youth violence include history of being abused or abusing others, school truancy, poor time use, exposure to crime, mental illness, drug and alcohol use, gang involvement, access to guns, and absence of familial and social support structures” (Goertz, 2008, para1).

**Animals**

Millions of animals are rescued every year. Animal rescues and shelters are overflowing. The goal of animal rescues and shelters is to adopt animals into *forever homes*, or homes where they will live out the rest of their lives (The Humane Society of the United States, 2013). Some animals have been abused or neglected and are not suitable to be adopted into a family. Some shelters and rescues have programs that provide training to the animals in order to increase their suitability for adoption. In this study, we will explore the therapeutic benefits for at-risk youth in providing the training for rescued animals.

**The Setting**

Teacher’s Pet: Dogs and Kids Learning Together (2013) is an innovative collaboration between several animal shelters and educational programs in Oakland County, Michigan. This program pairs at-risk youth with hard-to adopt shelter dogs for a workshop in basic obedience. Through the power of the human-animal bond, according to staff at Teacher’s Pet, student trainers are able to experience tremendous growth and behavioral improvements and dramatically improve the adoptability of the shelters dogs, giving them a better chance at finding
a loving, permanent family. One of the facilities that work directly with Teacher’s Pet is Children’s Village.

Children’s Village is a division of Oakland County’s Department of Health and Human Services Department. It provides a unique approach to treatment of youth that are in temporary need of out-of-home care and are referred by the Oakland County Circuit Court Family Court. Youth placed in Children’s Village are classified as emotionally impaired or at-risk. Most of the youth have a diagnosis of conduct disorder, bipolar disorder, anxiety, or depression (Oakland County Children’s Village, 2012).

There are three different types of housing at Children’s Village. Secure detention is a short-term locked down unit where youth, ages 10-18, are held while awaiting court hearings. The youth are closely monitored and supervised at all times. The court system places youth in secure detention and determines the youth length of stay. Youth may be held in this unit due to the seriousness of the offense, a history of criminal offenses, a threat to others, or to ensure that the youth returns to court. The residential treatment is a long-term program where youth, ages 12-18, are sent by the courts for rehabilitative treatment. This setting consists of four non-secure cottages for 60 boys and 20 girls. The court decides when the youth will be released from this program, but it depends on the youth’s progress. Shelter care services are short-term housing for children, ages 0-18, who have been removed from their homes. They will stay in this home until the court or the Department of Human Services decides whether they will return to their family, go to foster care, be placed in Children’s Village, or go to another facility (Oakland County Children’s Village, 2012).

The philosophy of Children’s Village is to bring positive changes in the lifestyle of the youth. They believe in providing the least restrictive environment to facilitate and reinforce the
skills and values of each individual to be more successful with living in the community. The focus of treatment at this facility is to work with each client and the client’s family to reintroduce the individual to the community as early as possible with keeping the safety of the individual and community in mind (Oakland County Children’s Village, 2012).

In a telephone interview, (November 7, 2011), Amy Johnson, founder and program director at Teacher’s Pet, provided information about the programming at Teacher’s Pet. The children engage in the Teacher’s Pet program for two hours, two times a week for twelve weeks. Students are placed into pairs or work individually and are educated on basic obedience training. They are then matched up with a dog with which they can implement their new skills. After the twelve weeks of training, the dogs are available for adoption. Children and youth can participate in this program for as long as they are from a facility that works with Teacher’s Pet. Interested participants must write an essay or fill out a questionnaire to describe why they want to participate in the program. They are then selected by the staff at Teacher’s Pet. There are usually 14-17 students that participate in Teacher’s Pet from Children’s Village. Male and female students train at separate times. The educational program transports students to the Teacher’s Pet facility for the program.

This type of interaction would fall under the category of AAI. Within AAI, terms such as animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and animal-assisted activities (AAA) are commonly used but loosely defined. For example, Pet Partners (2012), previously known as the Delta Society, defines AAT as “a goal-directed intervention in which an animal that meets specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT is directed and/or delivered by a health/human service professional with specialized expertise, and within the scope of practice of his/her profession. AAT is designed to promote improvement in human physical, social, emotional,
and/or cognitive functioning [cognitive functioning refers to thinking and intellectual skills].

AAT is provided in a variety of settings and may be group or individual in nature. This process is documented and evaluated. Key features include: specified goals and objectives for each individual; and measured progress.” (AAT Overview section, para. 1). However, AAT has been used to describe many different human and animal interactions, most of which do not include specific goals or measure progress (Kruger & Serpell, 2010).

Pet Partners (2012) defines AAA as “opportunities for motivational, educational, recreational, and/or therapeutic benefits to enhance quality of life. AAA are delivered in a variety of environments by specially trained professionals, paraprofessionals, and/or volunteers, in association with animals that meet specific criteria. Key features include: specific treatment goals are not planned for each visit; volunteers and treatment providers are not required to take detailed notes; and visit content is spontaneous and visits last as long or as short as needed.” (AAA Overview section, para. 1).

In order to understand what is being discussed when it comes to using animals as a means to help people, there should be agreement on what to call each intervention. Through the definitions above we can see that AAT and AAA are not appropriate terms for the interactions while training animals. Instead, we will use the term youth-engaged rescue animal training, operationally defined as teaching youth to train abused or neglected animals how to behave on a daily basis to give them a chance to be adopted into a family to live out the rest of their life. This approach focuses on helping both the youth and the animals participating in the program. We seek to begin an exploration of the benefits of this approach for at-risk youth.

The youth participating in the selected program also undergo other types of treatments and interventions. Because of this, a standardized assessment might not capture the specific
effect of the relationship between the youth and the animals. The type of benefits that each youth receives from the animals may also be different depending on need. In addition, the interactions with the animals could have multiple meanings for each individual. Instead of asking predetermined questions through quantitative research, and risk asking the wrong questions, we have chosen to use a qualitative approach using a technique called photovoice. This method will show us what training these animals means to each individual, allowing us to see any reoccurring themes.

**Photovoice**

Photovoice is a method of data collection that empowers its participants. Participants of photovoice are given a camera and asked to take pictures of certain aspects of their lives. Instead of asking closed-ended questions which may evoke superficial answers, photovoice allows a person to capture and communicate a deeper meaning. “The three main goals of photovoice are (1) to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussions of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 370).

Photovoice has been utilized with a variety of populations from researching play with children in Tanzania (Berinstein & Magalhaes, 2009) to students advocating for a smoking policy change on a college campus in the United States (Seitz et al., 2012). Sixteen children of Tanzania were given disposable cameras and educated on how to use them. They were asked to take pictures of play in their community. All of the photographs were analyzed and four specific themes emerged from the results. The themes were discussed and the conclusion was made that children will use creativity and resourcefulness to play with whatever they have available to
them despite lack of resources and adult encouragement (Berinstein & Magalhaes, 2009). In the second study, forty-nine college students were instructed on photography and educated on tobacco use and policies. They were able to use their own camera or given a disposable camera for the project. The students were asked what their concerns were regarding the campus smoking policy and how did they think the smoking policy could be improved. Four themes also emerged from the pictures taken and discussions. After finalizing themes and discussion, a photo exhibit was held. Policy makers and members from the college attended and the issues and concerns were addressed and changed. Student participants felt empowered and felt that their views were heard (Seitz et al., 2012).

The questions that will be asked of the participants in this photovoice study are: 1) What does training this animal mean to you? And 2) How is your life different now that you are training or have trained animals that need you? There is limited research that has sought to understand the effects of animal training on adolescents, especially those who are at-risk. The purpose of this study is to find some of the benefits to youth of training an animal in need, as described by the participants of Teacher’s Pet. These findings could then be used to implement animal training or animal caregiving into settings to help benefit children in need.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were male youth participating in the Teacher’s Pet: Dogs and Kids Learning Together program through Children’s Village. Excluded from the study was any person who was not participating in the Teacher’s Pet program and not a student at Children’s Village.
Personnel

The student researcher, Rachel L. Williams, is a 27 year old Caucasian female. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts in Biology from Olivet College in Olivet, Michigan in 2008. She is a student in the Occupational Therapy Doctorate program at the University of Toledo in Toledo, Ohio. Rachel is a wife and mother, and is very interested in working with children and adolescents upon graduation. She has a lot of experience working with children through babysitting for many years, working as a para-professional at an elementary school for one year, providing swim lessons from children ages 0-5 for many years, and currently working as a swim coach for children ages 4-18. Her animal experience is also notable. She has volunteered at animal rescues, has had a variety of household pets, and also completed an animal care internship in 2008 at Binder Park Zoo in Battle Creek, Michigan. She is fascinated by animals, and the benefits that they could provide to children and adolescents.

The research advisor, Alexia E. Metz, is a 40 year old Caucasian female. She is married and has two children, twins aged eight years old. She obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Occupational Therapy at Eastern Michigan in 1995. She practiced as an occupational therapist for several years, working in a variety of traditional settings such as inpatient, skilled nursing, outpatient, home health, and school-based practice. Most of her clinical experience was with adults and children, though she saw some adolescent clients in nearly every setting. In 1999, she returned to college to earn a research doctorate degree in neuroscience. She completed her Ph.D. in 2006. Her thesis work involved animal research, mainly using rodents. She has had a variety of household pets. She and her husband briefly volunteered at an animal rescue. She has lived in rural, urban, and suburban settings. She has been an assistant professor at the University of Toledo since 2007. She teaches neuroscience and pediatric therapy in the occupational therapy
doctoral program. She also advises student research/scholarly projects. Her primary research interests include occupational therapy for children and sensory processing disorders. This will be one of the first qualitative research projects she has advised. The primary source of bias for Dr. Metz will be the desire for strong outcomes for the success of the project and the student, as well as the potential to maintain a line of research using this method.

The researchers consulted with a professional photographer on camera use, how to capture a good photograph, and how to handle images.

**Procedure**

Informed consent was obtained by the student researcher from the legal guardian of each participant. Informed consent was obtained through correspondence with the legal guardians by letter and phone. The youths were asked to assent to each stage of research participation.

Interaction between the researchers and the participants occurred at Children’s Village and at the Teacher’s Pet facility. Both facilities agreed to provide space on-site for research activities.

**Photography workshop**

The student researcher held a workshop with the participants to educate them on the cameras and effective use. The student researcher demonstrated camera use and maintenance. The student researcher displayed exemplary pictures through LCD projection and passing around hard copy samples. Cameras and batteries were passed out to each of the individuals that attended the workshop. Each participant was then given a chance to practice with his camera and take any pictures that he wished. The participants then were asked to share images for discussion about quality and possible ways to improve quality. Little emphasis was placed on the content or meaning of pictures taken in this practice session. Participants were not given the exact research questions until after this trial period. After training was completed, cameras were
cleared of all pictures. Workshops were held at the Children’s Village during afterschool hours. The workshop lasted 60 minutes.

**Photographing**

After the workshop, the participants were given the exact research questions, provided verbally and written on index cards: 1) What does training this animal mean to you? And 2) How is your life different now that you are training or have trained animals that need you? They were asked to take pictures during their enrollment in the Teacher’s Pet program, for a period of one month. The participants received periodic reminders to regularly engage in picture taking, by receiving written notes upon attending Teacher’s Pet. The participants were asked not to discuss the photographs that they are taking with one another and not to show each other the pictures. There was no limit to the number of pictures each participant could take, and participants were free to delete any picture from the camera that they did not desire to share with the researchers.

Participants were encouraged to take any picture that related to the research questions; therefore, they may have taken pictures while at Teacher’s Pet (i.e. related to “What does training this animal mean to you?”). To assist in gathering pictures during animal training activities, the student researcher was present at Teacher’s Pet for one session. The researcher took pictures under direction from the participants. Allowing the researcher to be present to take pictures for the participants allowed the student to remain engaged in the interaction with his animal but still provide the student the opportunity to talk about that part of their life if they chose. This method has the potential to create researcher bias in that the researcher may have either taken pictures of what she thought had meaning to the participant (but did not) or the researcher may have failed to take pictures of events that did have meaning to the participant.
However, the participants were asked after the session if any of the pictures had meaning to them.

Pictures could have also been taken at school or home (i.e. related to “How is your life different now that you are training or have trained animals that need you?”). While at Children’s Village facilities, participants checked cameras in with school teachers and/or staff. During educational programming, participants could request to check out the camera to take desired pictures and then return the camera to the teacher/staff. The purposes of having teachers and staff hold the cameras were 1) to prevent theft or destruction of the cameras by others and 2) to minimize disruption to ongoing educational programming.

At the conclusion of the month, researchers collected the cameras at Children’s Village. Before cameras were handed in, the participants were reminded that they were free to delete any picture that they wished. Researchers had pictures printed for each participant. For each participant, pictures were labeled with a unique participant code and sequentially numbered.

**Photograph narration**

With pictures in hand, researchers met individually with the participants at Children’s Village. Participants were asked to narrate each picture that they took. Participants were prompted with statements like “tell me about this picture”, “what does this image mean to you?”, and “why did you take this picture?”. These meetings were audio recorded for transcription, and the researcher also took notes. At the conclusion of these meetings, participants selected photographs to share with other participants in small focus groups. Narration sessions lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Narration interviews were held during after school hours at Children’s Village.
Focus groups

A focus group was then held by the student researcher at Children’s Village. Participants were asked to display and discuss the pictures they chose to share. Discussion was encouraged by the researcher who took the role of moderator. Prompts included “do any of the rest of you feel this way?” or “how do you see it differently?”. The focus group was also recorded for transcription, and the researcher took notes. The focus group was about 60 minutes in duration during after school hours at Children’s Village.

Analysis

Each audio recording was transcribed. Speakers and photographs were referred to by their codes. These codes were used for the remainder of data analysis. Pseudonyms are used in this dissemination.

Two researchers each conducted thematic analysis of photographic content, participants’ narrations, and focus group discussions. After this was done, the two raters compared their themes and collaborated until both reached an agreement on a set of themes. Once an agreement was reached, a third unbiased individual assessed the classifications that had been made and agreed with the theme classifications.

Finally, through a letter sent to Children’s Village, participants had the opportunity to endorse or reject each theme as well as to endorse or reject inclusion of his photographs or quotations in support of themes. Participants were given the opportunity to suggest new themes and recommend content in support of these. Since the researcher did not hear back from any of the participants, it was assumed that all participants agreed to each theme and endorsed the inclusion of his photographs and quotations in support of themes.
Results

Participants

The caregivers of seven male youths provided informed consent. Six participants attended the photography workshop. One of the boys never showed up for the workshop or to receive his camera. Five participants met with the researcher individually to narrate their photographs. One of the boys was discharged before the individual session. Four participants attended the focus group. One participant was discharged before the focus group session. Data from his photographs and individual narrations were included in the results.

Two participants experienced difficulties with their cameras/photographs. One participant attempted to delete one picture before turning in his camera and accidently deleted all of his pictures. He was unable to take more pictures due to time constraints. He still wished to participate and while talking referred to some pictures that he originally took. He ended up with two pictures that were taken by accident, but decided that he wanted to use them because he felt they really related to his life. Another participant stated that his camera was stolen so all of his pictures were gone. He described some of the pictures that he took in his individual meeting. He participated more in the group session where he contributed his feelings when asked if he agreed or disagreed with other participants.

Five participants were included in the final results. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. Greg is a 15 year old male who was staying in the secure detention unit throughout the research process. Sam is 15 year old male who was living in the residential treatment program at the beginning of the research process, but was transferred to secure detention after a few weeks into the picture taking portion of the research process. Blake is a 17 year old male who was residing in the residential treatment program during the research process. Derek is a 17
year old male who was residing in the secure detention unit at Children’s Village during the entire research process. Bill is a 17 year old male who was living in the secure detention facility until he was discharged between the individual and group sessions.

**Themes**

Through the individual meetings and the focus group, six themes emerged among the participants. These themes were:

- Gaining patience
- Forming an attachment to the dog
- Wanting to better themselves / Make better choices
- Helping others / Volunteering at Teacher’s Pet
- Teaching
- Relating to the dog

**Gaining patience.**

The theme of gaining patience was brought up by 3 out of the 5 participants, including Bill in the individual discussions about the pictures. When brought into the group, all four boys agreed that they learned how to be more patient in their lives from working with the dogs. While referring to his picture of his dog sitting in front of him and waiting for a command (Figure 1), Blake said:

> I learned how to be patient. I was not a patient guy, but they needed patience. They don’t just learn the second you want them to learn. They are not humans but they are just like us, they think like us. It’s like if someone was teaching you a math problem and you didn’t get it and you were trying to solve a problem but you didn’t get it and you didn’t learn so you went about it a different way you
probably cheated or something. You didn’t learn it. You could have kept
working kept working until you get it. That is the main thing, being patient. That
is what I learned. That’s good. That is like a really good thing because if you are
not patient bad things will happen. You always have to be patient.

The other boys in the group agreed with this statement. They felt that Blake’s statement
applied to them and they all said that they felt they gained patience. When asked about a picture
of him and his dog (Figure 2) in his individual interview, Greg said, “Training the dogs taught
me to get more patience. [It] showed me I could do stuff that I never thought I could do. I can
accomplish a lot of things…. Patience will make me a better dad.”

Bill took a picture of his son (Figure 3). When asked why he took this picture he
responded, “This one is my life…. The program showed me how to have more patience with
things I love to do and people that I love to be around.”

**Forming an attachment to the dog.**

In individual interviews, four out of five of the participants stated that they formed a
significant attachment to the dog or dogs with which they were working. However, the topic did
not resurface during the group session. The fifth participant, Derek, stated that he enjoyed the
program, but never made a comment referring to an attachment with the dog. Sam stated, when
asked what he learned from the program, “I liked helping out the dogs, if that is what you mean.
I miss my dog. He was a great dog.” Greg said, “I feel like I can get along with dogs better
now. I liked them before the program but I didn’t like them that much.”

When sharing a picture of his dog (Figure 4), Blake remarked:

The reason I took this picture because I am going to miss him. I liked this dog a
lot. I had him for like six weeks. When I first got [this] dog after I got [my first
dog] adopted, I didn't want to try to adapt to a new dog because I just got attached to the first one. But then I ended up getting [the] new dog. In the first week I was like, no I don’t like this dog because I miss my old dog, but then I decided to adapt to him and I ended up liking him. And every time I would see him he would be in his cage rolling in a circle waiting for me. One time I went in there and he was just sleeping in the cage and when he saw me he just started jumping and stuff. I like this dog a lot even though I had two dogs adopted.

He went on to say,

I feel sad that I am not going to see them again but I also feel good because I found them a home and stuff. I would rather be happy knowing that I found them a home, than me leaving this program and the dog was still in the shelter. It is good and bad. I am going to miss them but people are taking good care of them and they are not in a cage all day.

Bill also commented, “My dog made me happy.” He also stated that he took this picture of himself (Figure 5) because “I felt bad because it was the last day and we were leaving dogs there. My dog didn’t get adopted.”

**Wanting to better themselves / make better choices.**

This theme was mentioned in three of the boys’ individual sessions, but was not brought up again in the group session. While reflecting on the pictures that he took and accidentally deleted, Derek said,

I view my life like this is just a little mistake and it is a waste of my time being here. When I get out, there are a lot of things I need to value, like my choices. I have been doing some crazy things…. There is so much stuff I could be doing
right now…. There were some pictures on there that made me want to go to college because there were college pictures on there and of people graduating.

At the end of Blake’s session, reflecting back on the program and all of the pictures that he took he stated that one thing he would take with him from the program was,

learning from your mistakes and do the right thing. Before I did the dog program I would just worry about me when I was out there and I had a lot of friends but friends get you in trouble. I want to tell people to do the right thing. I want to help people. I used to be argumentative. Ever since I have been here I have learned a lot of things being away from my family. I am a good kid but I made a stupid decision. I am going to make better decisions when I leave.

Bill referred to the picture of his son’s outfit that says “I love my daddy” (Figure 6) when talking about his son. He stated, “I took this picture because it means a lot to me when he wears it. You know how people have collars for their dog and you have your name and everything, it is kind of like that. Bill also mentioned, “I want to make better choices so I can stay out of here and be a better dad so I can see my son more then just when I go on pass [leave facility to go home for a few days].”

Helping others / volunteering at Teacher’s Pet.

The next theme was another that only came up in the individual meetings. Three of five participants stated that they would like to help others or would want to volunteer at Teacher’s Pet. These participants felt that Teacher’s Pet was a very good program and that they would like to see it continue. All three stated they would like to help others, and two of the three specifically said that they want to volunteer at Teacher’s Pet when they were discharged from Children’s Village. This theme emerged at the end of each individual session and was not
prompted by any specific pictures. This theme was brought up when reflecting on the program in general.

When discussing the program in general, Derek said, “I learned to help others. I used to think of just myself all the time. I am trying to help others now.” Derek also said, “The program works for real. It is a good idea. Keep on doing that idea. It is working.”

Blake was very excited about the Teacher’s Pet program. At the end of his individual meeting, he was discussing how much he really liked the program. He enthusiastically stated,

I want to volunteer there after I am done with this program [Children’s Village]. I told them I am going to be good because there are going to be kids [in the Teacher’s Pet program] that were in my shoes and I am going to be there and tell them that I did this program too. I was just like you, and I was in this program and I finished it. If the kids are struggling I can be there to help them out because I have been here. I have done it and I learned from my mistakes. I want to be there to help out kids and help out dogs too.

Bill also stated that he wanted to volunteer as well. He said, “It made me want to go work there and when I get out. I have an application started to volunteer there when I get out.”

Teaching.

In individual interviews, three out of five participants mentioned that they taught the dogs how to do different commands. One of the participants also mentioned that he now tries to teach other people as well. While referring to a picture of his dog (Figure 9), Greg said, “I took this picture of my dog on a leash just chilln’ because it was hot outside. I taught my dog to sit, come, and bow.”

Blake showed a picture of his dog rolling over (Figure 8). He said,
The only thing they knew was sit. Give me paw, roll over, (...) leave it, army crawl, (...) stay, I taught them that. Like when we walk and they are on a leash and they are pulling me. Every time they would do that I would stop and tell them don’t do that. That took a long time. That probably took the whole lesson. The whole 6 weeks. Because they are stuck in a cage for 24 hours a day and Tuesday and Thursday they only come out for an hour. So I understand it would be hard if it was like us or someone that was locked in a cage for that long. They just want to go outside and run and stuff. That is why I didn’t really care if they didn’t get that.

Bill was proud of the commands that he taught his dog. He took a picture of his son crawling (Figure 7) and talked about how excited he was when he saw his son crawl for the first time. He said “It was really neat and it meant a lot to me the first time my dog did the army crawl. It really reminded me of when my son started to crawl. It made me really happy.” Bill also mentioned that he taught his dog how to stay, as well. Bill also feels that he needs to share what he learned about dogs with others. He said,

Seeing people that hit their dogs I feel like I need to teach them to put their dog in a different room [when you are getting frustrated with them]. [I want to] tell them to just let him sit there for a minute and then let him back out, or [tell them] you take a break from your dog. ’cause I see people hit their dogs but I never said anything to them ’cause it’s their dog.
Relating to dog.

Four out of five participants agreed with this theme. Derek addressed this theme in his individual session and then shared one of his accidental pictures with the group (Figure 10). He thought the picture could definitely relate to his life. He said,

This one I have something to say. This one is like walls. Locked up like you are in a box and can’t get out, like where I am now. It is hurtful and a waste of time. I feel violated. I am getting through it though. I will be out soon. That’s about it though, for real…. I learned that it feels good to work with the dogs. I can relate to the dogs. They are locked in cages. I am in the same position. They have the same feelings as me which I didn’t really know that dogs had the same feelings as humans till I went to that program. They taught me a lot I know they are hurting the same way I am. It felt good to get the dog adopted…. I can relate to that too because I am adopted. But it’s all good.”

The other boys in the group session all agreed with Derek. Sam stated, “Yeah 24-7 I feel like I’m in a box everyday.” Derek replied, “I can relate to the dogs because they are in a cage 24-7. I am happy to get out of the building and they feel good about getting out of the cage.” When asked if the boys felt good about being able to let the dogs out of the cages, Derek answered, “Yes. They like it just like we like it when we get out.” Sam said, “Yes I feel the same way.” Blake responded,

I feel the same way but I have a little more freedom. When you get to a level 4 [in Children’s Village] they can start trusting you and you can go out by yourself. If I was stuck in here 24 hours a day [in the lockdown unit at Children’s Village] I would be pretty mad too.
Sam shared,

It was fun. It was a good experience. It is a lot better. It feels good to get out.

The first time I went to the dog program was the first time I left this place. It felt
great. The dogs probably felt the same way I felt; excited. Like yeah, I finally get
to go somewhere.

**Discussion**

The photographs, descriptions, and discussions produced from the photovoice process
represent what training a dog meant to five of the boys from Children’s Village who participated
in the Teacher’s Pet program in Oakland County, Michigan. Some of the themes, such as
forming an attachment to the dog and relating to the dog were themes that could have been
expected for youth who participate in a program to take care of dogs in an animal shelter. Some
of the other themes that arose, however; were unexpected. Volunteering at Teacher’s Pet,
gaining patience, and wanting to make better choices were among the themes that might not have
been predicted. This validates the qualitative approach for this topic. Taken together, these
themes provide evidence to the significant impact that a program such as this can have on at-risk
youth.

Even though forming an attachment to the dog and relating to the dog could have been
anticipated, the thoughts and feelings the participants shared addressing these themes were not
predictable. The unintentional picture of the walls (Figure 10) was related in to this theme.
Derek was very thoughtful in the way he described the walls and related them to the dogs being
in a cage. All of the boys in the group related to Derek after he described how he felt. They all
realized that they felt like they were in a cage and they knew exactly how the dogs felt being in
their cages. They sympathized with the dogs that were active, excitable, or took longer to learn
commands. They realized that if they were in a cage all day they would feel the same way. They felt happy to be out of their “cage”. Some were even happier because their dog was adopted and would not have to return to a cage.

The goal of this study was to discover the self-expressed benefits to youth of training an animal in need, as described by the participants of Teacher’s Pet. This study suggests that the youth who engage in the Teacher’s Pet program gain more from the program than they realize when they apply to participate.

The findings of this study are consistent with the literature related to the benefits of caring for an animal or participating in AAT. When caring for an animal, research shows that people usually form attachments to the animal and sometimes think of the animal as a family member (Templer & Arikawa, 2011). The boys in this study described forming attachments to the dogs as well as relating to them. Also, animals can be very motivating for people (Hart, 2010). The dogs in this study motivated the boys to teach the dogs new commands and also motivated them to gain more patience with them which, as noted by the participants, translated into their everyday lives.

Within AAT, several studies show the benefits that people receive from working with therapy dogs. Some benefits such as increased self-esteem or decreased blood pressure can be seen just by the presence of a therapy dog (Baun et al., 1984; Wells, 2005; Therapy Dog International, 2013). Even though the animals in this study were not therapy animals, they still provided benefits to the youth who worked with them. Youth who are at-risk usually lack the ability to form healthy relationships with others due to many different factors (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). The benefits seen in this study, such as forming attachments to the dogs, wanting to volunteer or help others, and gaining patience, could all benefit the youth by
helping them learn the things that are needed to form healthy relationships. On the other hand, the dogs in this study also benefitted from the interaction. All of the dogs learned new commands and several of them were even adopted into their forever home.

Limitations

It is important to note several limitations in this study. First, due to the fact that two of the boys did not have all of their pictures, some of the results could be skewed. There may have been pictures that may have created other themes or brought up feelings that were not captured in the group session. The boys may also have felt differently about some of the comments they made if they had their own pictures that may have portrayed something else. Similarly only four out of the five boys participated in the group session. The fifth boy may have had some other comments or may have led the group in a different direction. Second, the small sample size can affect the results. It is possible that the themes and findings in this study can not be generalized to all Teacher’s Pet’s participants or to similar programs. The third limitation may be due to the fact that the boys wanted to participate in this program. They had to apply and be chosen for the program. Self selection may indicate that the youth were predisposed to the benefits of the program. Other limitations could have been influence from the researchers or the staff at Teacher’s Pet to take certain pictures, or the desire for the participants to please the staff and researchers.

Implications

Youth who are at-risk can be a very difficult population to treat in occupational therapy. If occupational therapy practitioners do not relate to at-risk youths, they will very likely not take part in the therapy. It is necessary to find opportunities for engagement that have deeper meaning to the youth. This can be particularly challenging if the targeted youths are at a stage in
their lives in which they perceive that few things are important to them. Having a program such as Teacher’s Pet, gives the youth a meaning and a purpose to doing something. They may not anticipate helping themselves when they begin the program. They may simply be excited to playing with dogs as an alternative to their ordinary routine.

Teacher’s Pet is not run by occupational therapists, but a program such as Teacher’s Pet, could fulfill AOTA’s mission in providing an alternative to poor choices made by youth. It can provide meaningful alternatives to take up their time. It can also provide opportunities to gain skills. Together, these outcomes may lead to better decision making in the future. According to the AOTA’s Societal Statement on Youth Violence (Goertz, 2008), it is the duty of occupational therapists to “respond to youth violence by promoting overall health and well-being among youth” (Goertz, 2008, para 2). Part of the duty of an occupational therapist is to replace unhealthy choices with safer, healthier, and more productive occupations. This can lead to positive changes. AOTA also states that occupational therapists provide services by “addressing the engagement patterns and lifestyle choices of at-risk youth through methods such as effective transition services and life skills remediation” (Goertz, 2008, para 2).

Occupational therapists could bring a unique perspective to a program like Teacher’s Pet. Occupational therapists utilize occupation as a means and end. Occupational therapists theory posits that occupation helps promote quality of life and well being. Individuals value being able to engage in their valued occupations despite disabling conditions—whether it is going back to work, going to school, or being able to dress oneself. The themes that emerged in this study, such as gaining patience, forming attachments, wanting to better oneself, and wanting to volunteer may promote engagement in the youth’s occupations. Fulfilling the role in the youths’ lives such as, student, child, friend, or even parent, may be better addressed in a program run by
occupational therapists. As occupational therapists are trained to critically, deliberately, and therapeutically use occupation as way to facilitate progress. An occupational therapy practitioner could evaluate the performance skills of a participant in a rescue animal training program and adjust the demands of the tasks to support skill enhancement. For example, a youth needing to gain skill in time management could be given the responsibility of creating and following a daily schedule for feeding, grooming, and training an animal. Similarly, an occupational therapy practitioner could modify the materials used in interactions with the animals in order to support engagement for youth with limited physical capacity or cognitive disabilities. Modifying a ball thrower or brush for a person with an amputation or decreased ability to grasp could allow the youth to still engage in playing or grooming tasks. Also, utilizing pictures or symbols could aid a participant with difficulty following verbal or written directions.

Another unique program with similar outcomes is PAR FORE (Perseverance, Accountability, Resiliency, Fellowship, Opportunity, Respect and Empowerment) in Newark, N.J. It is a mentor program for at-risk youth which utilizes golf to teach skills to successfully fulfill the youth’s roles as students, friends, family members and community members. The program director, Jennifer Gardiner, OTD, OTR, notes that any sport would work to meet the goals of the program. Keeping the youth occupied after school is very important for keeping them out of trouble and on track with their roles in life (Stephens, 2013).

Other programs that may result in the same benefits to youth as Teacher’s Pet or PAR FORE may be programs that address life skills remediation for transition to adulthood or out of foster care. Incorporating the Photovoice method into any one of these programs could enhance the outcomes with at-risk youth. This method allows the youth to look more deeply into how
they are feeling and how the program may have changed them. The themes that emerged in this research may not have been brought to the participants’ attention if they had not taken the time to take and discuss their pictures. This method could serve as a unique intervention for this population.

**Future research**

More research is needed to enhance the knowledge of how caring for animals can benefit at-risk youth. This study gave qualitative data for five individuals all participating in the same program. A research project to address a wider selection of individuals in this population may be beneficial to this topic. Future research could also explore the possibilities of caring for animals in other populations, such as with children with developmental disabilities, the elderly, or patients with Alzheimer’s disease. More research and data on this topic will expand and foster the growth of this approach so that it can be more widely accepted among a variety of professionals. This may lead to more programs that may benefit humans and animals alike.
References


Figure 1. Blake patiently waiting for his dog to perform a command.

Figure 2. Greg rewarding his dog with a treat for learning a new command.
Figure 3. Bill’s son, which he referred to as his life.

Figure 4. Blake’s dog during a training session.
Figure 5. Bill was sad because the program was over and he had to leave his dog.

Figure 6. Bill’s son’s outfit that makes him feel good. It reminds him that he wants to be a good dad.
Figure 7. Bill’s taught his dog to army crawl, which reminded him of when his son first crawled.

Figure 8. Blake’s dog demonstrating “roll over”, a command Blake taught him.
Figure 9. Greg’s dog on a leash “just chilln’ because it was hot outside”.

Figure 10. Derek’s unintentional picture of the walls which prompted him to describe his feelings of being locked up.