Shelter Cat adoption in families of children with autism: Impact on cat stress and child’s social skills/anxiety

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Background
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) occurs in one of 68 children.
- ASD; social skill deficits, repetitive behaviors, and anxiety. Symptoms impact child and family functioning. There is no cure for ASD, and treatment approaches aim to lessen the symptoms.
- Extant literature on children with ASD and Companion Animals found animals to be an alternative/adjunctive method of alleviating social skill deficits and anxiety (O’Haire, 2013).
- Previous research has focused on the interaction of dogs with children who have ASD, but dogs may not provide the best fit for all children and their families. This is especially possible given that hypersensitivities to sound are common among these children (Carlisle, 2014).
- Cat’s quieter demeanor has not been studied in families of children with ASD.
- Approximately 3.2 million cats enter U.S. animal shelters nationwide every year. One of the main explanations of why cats are given up is for behavioral reasons.
- Cat behavior problems often result from stress, such as entering a new family. Cats respond to stressful stimuli with increased cortisol levels (Botchkarev, 2003).
- Cortisol concentrations decreased significantly in dogs quietly interacting with a person (Odendaal, 2000). Hypervisitvitiy to sound is common in children with ASD.
- Calm, quiet interaction with a cat may mitigate this.
- No study of cat stress living in families of children with ASD.

Objectives
1. To investigate stress in cats introduced into the family of a child with ASD.
2. To examine the impact of a cat on the social skills/anxiety of a child with autism and bonding with the cat by the child and parent.

References

Design and Methods

Recruitment: Thompson Center Data Base & Community
Recruitment: Central Missouri Humane Society & Second Chance
Treatment Group
Control Group

ASD families with no free roaming pets and willing to adopt a cat
Shelter cats with FTP score ≥ 20
Adopt shelter cat
2-3 day post adoption
6,12,18 week visit
6,12,18 week visit
Home Visits
Home Visit

Phone Call – Waiver of documentation of consent
Assign Treatment or Control Group
Schedule Enrollment Home Visit

Data Collection Screening & Baseline Treatment Group Control Group

FTP (cat scoring tool) X
Family Screening for cat adoption X
CSS X X X X X
Fecal Sample X X X X
Cat weight X X X X
Demographic Questionnaire X
SSIS-RS X X X
SCARED X X X
LAPS, CABS X X X X
Child Open Ended Questions X X X

Conclusions
- We expect cats will have no significant increase in stress levels (fecal cortisol concentrations, stress behavior and body weight).
- We expect children with ASD living with cats will have more social skills and less anxiety than those living without cats.
- We expect caregivers and their children with ASD will bond with their cat.

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