

# ANIMAL ASSISTED THERAPY



Animal-assisted therapy, or AAT, is where a trained clinician works with an animal to provide therapy to a person. AAT is usually provided over several sessions and as part of person's NDIS plan.

AAT most often involves dogs, but can also involve horses (hippotherapy), guinea pigs, cats, ferrets, birds, farm animals and zoo animals! We're working on a Superyou AAT service provided by occupational therapist, Ash, and her therapy dog, Koda.

## ⚡ What's special about a therapy dog?

Therapy dogs work as part of a trained handler-canine team to provide therapeutic benefits to a client. Therapy dogs usually team up with an occupational therapist or speech pathologist to work on developing sensory, social and communication skills with people.

Therapy dogs are different from service or assistance dogs, as these dogs usually live with families and are trained to do things specific things relating to that family.

## ⚡ Human-animal bond & AAT

The human-animal bond is a

*mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviours that are essential to the health and wellbeing of both parties. This includes, but is not limited to emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, animals, and the environment.*

The human-animal bond is a well-researched phenomenon. Utilising this bond, AAT is designed to promote improvement in human physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive functioning.

## ⚡ AAT @ Superyou

Our AAT services will be led by occupational therapists alongside trained therapy dogs, like Koda.

AAT sessions will be designed to help clients achieve their therapeutic goals in:

- Emotional regulation
- Social participation
- Gross & fine motor skills
- Communication skills
- Pretend play
- Turn-taking
- Self-care
- and more!

## ⚡ Theoretical foundations

AAT is deeply rooted in the theory of attachment. It is founded on the understanding that

*humans, like many animals, are biologically predisposed to seek out and sustain physical contact and emotional connection to selective figures with whom they become familiar and come to rely on for psychological and physical protection.*

The development of a secure attachment with the client and the therapy dog within therapy sessions is crucial for the success of the therapy goals and intervention.

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## AAT ASSISTS IN:

- ⚡ **Emotional regulation** through providing a calming effect during sessions, supporting emotional regulation strategies or providing a platform to demonstrate emotional regulation.
- ⚡ **Increasing motivation** for clients to engage in therapy. Therapy dogs are used as a tool for engagement during sessions and are incorporated into functional activities.
- ⚡ **Development of gross and fine motor tasks** including motor planning and sequencing through play.
- ⚡ **Social skills development** by understanding body language and social cues, turn-taking, waiting and listening.
- ⚡ **Development of play and communication skills** by encouraging clients to communicate their wants and needs through words or other means.
- ⚡ **Development of social and pretend play skills** namely through engaging the therapy dog in imaginative play and role play.
- ⚡ **Development of skills around self-care and care of others.** This may include learning skills like dressing, feeding, routines and other self-care tasks.

## BENEFITS OF AAT

- ⚡ Therapy dogs provide a happy, non-judgmental nature that can make it easier for clients open-up and engage with therapy.
- ⚡ Animals in therapy have been suggested to 'normalise' a social situation, providing people with a conversation starter and common ground to begin the rapport-building process.
- ⚡ Therapy dogs have been described as a 'social icebreaker' and a social lubricant between humans. This provides a platform to break down barriers and increase occupational engagement.
- ⚡ Clients who feel bonded and comfortable around a therapy dog in sessions experience neurochemical and hormonal reactions including an increase in oxytocin and decrease in cortisol levels enabling emotional regulation and reduced stress responses.