

Unique AAI Species

A Guideline for Practitioners



Patti Anderson

Niki Vettel

Molly DePrekel

Disclaimer: The authors of this material are not liable for any negative outcomes caused by use or misuse of the information in this document. The health and wellness of unique species should be regularly assessed by a qualified veterinarian for that type of animal. It is also recommended that the animal's interest, behavior, and skills be professionally evaluated.

Practitioners should pursue continuing education to fulfill professional responsibilities and standards in this emerging practice area. Anyone working in the area of AAI, need to understand the difference between volunteer visiting standards and those for paid professional interventions. The job demands are very different for both handler and animal. Many unique species may mask their stress level. It is the responsibility of the practitioner or volunteer to know and enlist AAI best practices to protect the animals involved and the people they interact with.

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Meet the Authors!



Patti Anderson, M.Ed., C.P.D.T.

Patti has experience in teaching therapy animal classes for multiple species, including dogs, cats, rabbits & guinea pigs. She is a member of the Association of Professional Dog Trainers (APDT) and a Tellington TTouch® practitioner. She is a retired school counselor who partnered with her first therapy dog at an elementary school in Minnesota. She has also taught Animal-Assisted Therapy courses for Saint Mary's University in Minnesota and presented at Adler Graduate School and for the University of MN. She is a Pet Partners® evaluator, and has partnered with over twenty of her own animals in a variety of venues. Patti currently teaches therapy dog classes at Agile Canines in St. Louis Park, MN and is enlisted for AAI activities and establishing programming in local schools and hospitals through her LLC.



Niki Vettel, M.A., M.Ed.

Niki found her way into mental health counseling and Animal-Assisted Interventions through volunteer work while doing her “day job” as a long-time producer and media executive in public broadcasting. While visiting forensic psychiatric units and conducting animal-assisted activities with Ralphie, the first Pet Partners® registered therapy guinea pig in Massachusetts, she realized that this was the next career path she wanted to pursue. She returned to school to earn an M.Ed. in Counseling Psychology (Cambridge College) and simultaneously completed the Certificate in Animals and Human Health program from the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work. She has worked for several years as a group therapist with dual diagnosis patients, IOPS, general adult psychiatric patients, and patients in sober houses, incorporating animal-assisted interventions into her group work. Niki works exclusively with guinea pigs, who she believes are the best therapy animals in the world!

She is also a Reiki Master, and is certified as a Pet Bereavement Counselor.

Niki lives outside of Boston, MA, with two guinea pigs and a cat.



Molly DePrekel, MA, LP

Molly is a licensed psychologist in Private Practice who focuses on facilitating growth and transformation with individuals in their therapeutic work. Her experience in hospitals, educational settings and out-patient mental health treatment programs combine to create unique holistic treatment with clients. She utilizes the unique relationship people have with animals and nature to assist her in therapy with clients. Her specialties include trauma work, animal assisted therapy, Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, Adaptive Internal Network Model, and EMDR. She also offers consulting to professionals who want to incorporate Sensorimotor Psychotherapy or Animals and Nature based therapies. She served as an adjunct faculty member at the University of Minnesota, and currently is a professor at the University of Denver in the School of Social Work at the Institute for Human Animal Interaction. She is an international speaker and has taught and trained others around the world in the field of human animal interactions.

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Introduction

This document is a brief overview of the pros and cons involved in animal-assisted interventions (AAI) for practitioners that may want to partner with a species other than dogs.

The overall information is a snapshot of some of the more popular species of animals partnered with in common AAI settings other than dogs, such as “pocket pets”, cats, birds, and miniature equines (if you are interested in working with larger horses, there are several national organizations listed in the resource section). Throughout this document we refer to these examples of animals as “unique species”.

If you already have an animal that you may want to work with in AAI or are interested in acquiring a different species, this document is designed to provide best practices and resources to assist you.

It is important to work through the checklist that is included in this guide in order to determine the efficacy for partnering with a particular species. Implementing best practices for AAI work is paramount to the welfare of the animal and the people that interact with them.

There are many differences between the variety of animals that are kept commonly as pets. One of these is the difference between a domesticated species that spans centuries of breeding and handling, and an animal that is considered wild under city and state laws which encompasses those that have been bred in captive breeding programs as well.

There are pets that are predators (dogs, cats, ferrets, etc.) and those that are prey animals (rabbits, birds, equines, etc.). Depending on which of these two categories an animal is in will influence their behaviors and response to the world they live in. Each individual animal, no matter which species they are, has their own personality and set of preferences that also need to be acknowledged.

The smaller unique species with less defenses are vulnerable to being ignored, discarded, mistreated and misunderstood. All animals need to live in a safe environment with enrichment opportunities they enjoy, which may or may not include animal-assisted intervention activities.

To better achieve an understanding of the more common types of unique species that are highlighted in this document, there is a quick snapshot of information for the “pocket pets”, rabbits, cats, miniature equines and birds. Please select the species you are interested in and review the information to learn more about them.

This document utilizes a checklist that has been applied only to cats, birds, miniature equines or “pocket pets”. It may be an option to apply the checklist to other unique species as well.

AAI Checklist

The AAI Checklist for unique species will give you a more comprehensive understanding of the entire AAI picture, especially as it applies to the smaller animals highlighted in this document.

It is important to determine if your lifestyle, housing and financial resources will help support a partner in AAI throughout their entire life. The template for this checklist may possibly be applied to some other species as well.

Directions: You can utilize the resources provided in this checklist to better assess an animal's viability for engaging in animal-assisted interventions. It is recommended that you apply best practices and thoroughly read and check off each section listed below. Being a competent practitioner also aligns with being proactive in protecting your animal and assessing their wellness on a daily basis.

Please work through each step of this checklist!

- Review Information on Animal Welfare and Competencies in AAI
- Learn the terminology
- Research legal considerations
- Find qualified veterinarians
- Acquire knowledge and experience with the species you work with
- Understand factors for selecting an animal
- Understand training options
- Understand evaluation options for unique species
- Know your resources

Animal Welfare Considerations and Competencies for Animal-Assisted Therapies and Interventions

Please review the information below.

1. Animal Welfare Considerations in Animal-Assisted Interventions

<https://www.human-animal-interaction.org/haib/download-info/animal-welfare-considerations-in-animal-assisted-interventions/>

2. Recommendations for Transdisciplinary Professional Competencies and Ethics for Animal-Assisted Therapies and Interventions

<https://www.mdpi.com/2306-7381/8/12/303>

Terminology

Learn the terminology that is the most current and legally accurate concerning therapy, service and emotional support animals (ESA). There is a lot of misinformation about therapy animals out there, such as on the internet. Consequently, it is important for practitioners to stay up to date with the terminology being used and seek information from reliable sources.

Here are a few such sources:

1. On the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) website, where you will find up-to-date information on the laws as they apply to service and emotional support animals: <https://adata.org/guide/service-animals-and-emotional-support-animals>.
2. A list of the most current terms AAI Practitioners utilize is listed on the Pet Partners website (a national non-profit therapy animal organization): petpartners.org
3. Here is a link to the general terminology currently applied in AAI: <https://petpartners.org/learn/terminology/>

Legal Considerations

Research the city, county, state and federal laws for acquiring and housing the species you are interested in doing AAI work with. If you live in a rental property, check with the landlord and have a contingency plan for optional housing that would allow your animal to live there, if in the future you need to move.

Note: In neighboring cities, one city may have an ordinance that allows a ferret as a pet, for example, and the other may not. The county or state may also have multiple animal licensing requirements, or zoning restrictions for types of animals. It is important to find out as much information as possible about the legalities involved with acquiring and living with a specific species of animal in your area before acquiring that animal.

Liability insurance is necessary, and the opportunities and options available for professionals working with animals is constantly changing. Research the various options carefully. Your employer may have a rider for AAI work and cover your services. Currently if you declare AAI as a competency with your licensing board i.e., board of social work, psychology, etc. you are covered to practice AAI, yet you may not be covered if your animal bites, scratches, knocks someone down or passes along a zoonotic infection.

Note: A unique insurance coverage for AAI professionals after they have become a member of the Association of Animal-Assisted Intervention Specialists (AAAI), and have passed the online component, is available through this organization at: www.aaaiponline.org

Veterinarians

Veterinarians' involvement in these (AAI) programs from their inception is critical because they serve as advocates for the health and welfare of animals participating in these programs, and as experts in zoonotic disease transmission.

From the AVMA (American Veterinary Medical Association) website: www.AVMA.org:

1. *It is important to find a qualified veterinarian for the species you are currently living with or will be incorporating into your life. Veterinarians who work with species other than dogs and cats are referred to as "exotic pet veterinarians" (although many exotic veterinarians also see dogs and cats.)*

When selecting a veterinarian, it is helpful to make inquiries about their credentials, including how many years they have been practicing and the number of animals they treat annually of that particular species. If a vet has only worked on a handful of animals of that species and another sees many times that number, it is something to consider. Check out their website and social media links, reading the reviews from their clients. Contact local organizations or clubs that showcase the species you are interested in and ask for their recommendations of qualified veterinarians that treat that type of animal.

2. *Establish a relationship with your animal's veterinarian. Ask if your vet and the agency have any experience in working with animals who do AAI. A qualified vet can assist with determining if your animal has the aptitude and maturity for AAI work, or refer you to someone who may be able to do this in addition to their general health and well-being. They may be able to offer resources for any behavior issues that may arise as well as zoonotic concerns.*

Note: Reptiles and amphibians must be handled carefully. In general, they are not as widely worked with in AAI. One reason may be due to an increased likelihood for exposure to zoonotic pathogens such as salmonella or botulism. It is important to have a qualified exotics veterinarian that can address any zoonotic concerns and assess that animal's viability for therapy work.

Acquire Knowledge and Experience

Knowledge

1. Research the type of animal/s you are interested in. Utilize the internet, media, books, professional journals or blogs, species-specific clubs, and professional organizations. Consider getting a degree in higher education; that will support and deepen your understanding of AAI techniques and best practices. Many colleges now have certificates

in AAI and allow students to design their capstone project to reflect how they want to work and practice in the field of AAI.

2. Attend webinars, workshops, seminars and conferences with subjects related to the type of animal you have or are interested in, as it pertains to the type of work you would like to do with them in the future.
3. Set a goal to get a certificate in a specialized technique that enhances animal training or wellness that encompasses unique species such as Tellington TTouch, Karen Pryor Academy (KPA) clicker training, Healing Touch for Animals, etc.

Note: A proactive AAI practitioner continues to learn about the species they partner with for the lifetime of that animal. It is also important to embrace best practices in AAI and to keep current with continuing education opportunities.

Experience

Albert Einstein once said, “The only source of knowledge is experience.”

There are many abandoned or neglected pets in the United States, with many ending up in rescues or shelters as a result. The owner may have had good intentions, but did not fully assess their own personal situation or understand the needs of the animal and their behaviors.

If you check out books on “how to swim”, research the subject on the internet and watch people swimming, you will have taken an excellent first step in knowing more about the activity. However, it is a totally different experience to enroll in an aquatics class, walk into a swimming pool, and immerse yourself in the water.

There are ways you can “immerse” yourself in experiencing a certain type of animal to get a better sense if this particular species would be a good fit for the animal becoming a member of your household. Some ideas are listed below on how to experience the type of animal/s you are interested in:

- Take care of a friend or relative’s pet while they are gone
- Volunteer at a local shelter or a rescue organization
- Provide a foster home for a rescue
- Assist at a therapy animal evaluation
- Volunteer to help miniature equine handlers groom their animal or clean out their stalls
- Offer to teach a relative or friend’s small animal some tricks
- Shadow a therapy animal handler on a visit when they volunteer in the community
- Join a club that focuses on specific species and get involved with their activities
- Shadow an AAI practitioner during a session
- Offer to assist at animal events that showcase the species you are interested in. Some examples might be: animal sports competitions, conformation or breed shows, meetups via social media, expos, conventions, county or state fairs, etc.

- Attend a workshop or conference that focuses on or includes unique species
- Intern at a facility that offers the type of AAI work you may want to do

Selecting an Animal

Characteristics of the following species (miniature equines, cats, guinea pigs, rabbits and birds) have been outlined in order to give you more information at a glance to assess if this type of animal is a fit for your home and potentially for AAI work too.

No matter whether you purchase a young animal from a breeder, adopt an adult animal from a rescue, or acquire a pet in another way, there are no guarantees that AAI work will be a fit for that animal in the future. There are no guarantees for aptitude and behavior with any animal. Some general tips that might assist you in avoiding making some common mistakes when selecting an animal are listed below.

Note: Any type of bite history the animal has with a person, no matter what the circumstances are, is an animal that should not be doing AAI work. Animals that unprovoked, aggressively attack other types of pets, are also not good candidates for AAI.

Keep a notebook to write down your impressions of each animal you meet and any pertinent information about them. Try not to select an animal based just on its appearance or get the first one that you see. What you see isn't always what you get! Be selective and ask a lot of questions!

Baby animals are cute, but they are a lot of work! The behaviors they exhibit when young may not necessarily reflect on the personality they will have as adults. The benefit of getting a very young animal is that you can work with them from an early age, desensitizing them to anxiety-producing stimuli, and handling them frequently while building a trusting bond. Many baby animals do not mature enough for AAI work until a year or two after they arrived in the home, so that is something to consider as well.

Shelter or rescued animals are usually overwhelmed and stressed while in their temporary setting. Adopting an animal from a shelter environment may not be conducive to assessing their actual personality and behavior tendencies. There may be some other resources available to help assess an animal's personality, for example, "Pawfiler®" (see resources on page 19), which is a computer program applicable to cats or rabbits.

Breeders

1. If you are searching for a specific breed of animal, check with your veterinarian if they know of any reputable breeders for that species. Ask people you know who have that type of animal and find out where they got their pet from. Check out the websites of the different groups that are active with that species and make inquiries.
2. It is important that you travel to the location where the breeder is located and assess the environment the animal was bred in. Insist on seeing both the parents and ask about any health or behavior issues that may be in their line.

3. A good breeder will have handled the babies (for most species) multiple times each day since birth. They should have gently exposed them to different sights, sounds and other stimuli.
4. Research the best age for that species to leave their mother and make sure the animal is fully weaned and healthy.
5. Ask the breeder about the best steps to integrate the baby animal into your home. They should send home the brand of food the animal has been eating, specific bedding they have been on and give advice on how much to handle them.
6. Many species have a better quality of life if they live with another animal that is compatible with them. Consider acquiring two youngsters at the same time from the breeder depending on the species.

Note: Throughout this document there are in general, no specific breeds of animals recommended over another. It would be difficult to reference all the breeds as there are thirteen different types of guinea pigs recognized in the United States and over fifty types of rabbits for example! There may be some breeds that are thought over others to be better suited for AAI work, however it is up to the practitioner to do their homework, and assess the animal they are interested in as an individual.

Shelters and Rescue Organizations

Adopting an animal from a recognized shelter or rescue organization can be a very wise way to bring an animal who is well-suited to AAI work into your home. Older animals will have personalities and habits that have been formed and which caring shelter or rescue workers can observe and describe to you. They should be able to tell you if a cat is shy but will respond to gentle petting, or if a rabbit or guinea pig likes to be held. This is good information to include along with your own interactions with the animal.

A caution about shelter animals is that what you see isn't always what you get. If the animal has only been there for a day or two, they may still be very quiet due to the shock of being in a shelter environment. If they have been there for several weeks or longer, they may have developed some negative or depressed behaviors than if they were housed in a home setting. It can take up to several weeks before many unique species settle in to a new home and start showing their regular behaviors.

Find out as much as you can about the history of the animal, their age and their behaviors during transport and in their new environment. If they were transported a long distance, find out the name of the shelter/rescue they were in before they were moved and make a phone call to that facility. Sometimes there is more information available from people at that facility about them or their situation.

Spend time with the animal of interest in a private visiting area or a separate room. If another animal of the same species is available, spend some time with them as a comparison to the one you are more interested in.

1. Get permission to treat the animal with food. In general (depends on the species and the individual animal) if an animal eats in this type of setting, they may be more comfortable around people.
2. Some shelters provide visiting rooms to perspective adopters. Stay quiet and let the animal make the choice of how or if they want to interact with you.
3. It is important that the animal has been seen by a veterinarian before you adopt them, which most shelters do. Smaller rescues are usually open to a request for their veterinarian to give the animal at least a cursory wellness exam. There are other rescues that will add to the adoption contract a contingency clause that states if the animal is checked by your veterinarian, and there are health issues, they may then choose a different animal and the other animal will be adopted out to others as a pet.
4. If an animal has come from an “animal mill” and ended up in a shelter or rescue, know that there may be some serious and expensive health and behavior issues. In general, an animal born and raised in this type of setting usually have difficulties. They missed out on being positively handled and adequately desensitized to common stimuli one would find in the typical home. AAI programs may be overwhelming to an animal from this type of environment.

An animal that has been housed with a rescue organization for at least one to two months in a foster home (after a vet check) with a rescue organization will have settled in more. Their true personalities and behaviors usually show up by then. A good foster home volunteer will let you spend one-on-one time with the animal and be able to give you input to their observations and impressions of them.

The more information you have on what the animal is like in a typical setting, the better chance you have of getting a good fit for your lifestyle, which may include AAI activities.

Owner Rehoming

If an animal is being advertised by the owner via the internet, buyer beware! There are some very responsible people selling their pet. There are situations where the best decision they can make for their animal is to find a different home for them. However, there are people that don't disclose the entire picture of their pet, and if there are significant issues, then that animal becomes *your* problem.

Ask a lot of questions about the animal that is posted and why they are rehoming them. Ask how many homes the animal has been in that the owner knows of. If the animal has been in multiple homes over a relatively short period of time, that may be a red flag.

Here are some suggestions for questions to ask about these types of postings.

1. **“Animal is middle aged”**—Ask the owners why they are rehoming the animal now when they have had them for several years? Sometimes they avoid disclosing the information about expensive health issues the animal now has and that they can't afford the vet bills. Other issues may be that the animal has developed behavior issues that are unacceptable

to the owner. There are often people who get a younger animal and keep the newer member of the family after deciding to rehome the older pet. That raises the question of what type of care the animal they are rehoming received.

2. **“Someone has allergies to the animal”**—Ask the owner how long the animal has been in their home and how they know it is the animal someone is allergic to? If they have had the animal for a really long period of time, there may be other issues going on instead. Perhaps the animal is too noisy (birds squawking, the hamster exercise wheel squeaking all night), the animal not using the litter box, or is biting people. The owner might be tired of cleaning the litter box cage or stall, or just doesn’t have enough time to care for it.
3. **“Animal is energetic”** – Sometimes this category translates to behavior issues. With unique species that live in a home, this listing for an animal is often due to an owner not understanding the needs of that particular species. It may also be a young animal that is taking longer to mature, doesn’t have enough living space or enrichment opportunities.

Ask what the animal’s typical routine during the day or the week is like. How often does the owner interact with their animal? Ask to see a photo of their pets living environment, especially if it is a caged animal. Does the animal have the amount of living space that is recommended by the experts? Ask about the enrichment activities that have been provided for this animal.

Note: Many well intended adults purchase pets for their children. If the child has loved that animal, positively interacted with it, but now are entering into a busy time in their life with other interests, their animal may be a well-adjusted and wonderful candidate for AAI programs.

If a child interacts with the animal at the onset of when they arrive, but then ignore it for weeks on end, with no enrichment activities or positive handling or care, then that animal may not be a good candidate for AAI work

Training

There was a movie from *Dreamworks*, that first aired in 2010, called “How to Train Your Dragon”! That same question usually surfaces during an AAI session that partners with animals other than dogs. Participants will ask the handler, “How do you train a _____ (insert the name of any type of unique species) to do therapy work. That is a good question!

When you do an internet search on how to train a dog for therapy work, there are pages and pages of information. Dog training schools and online programs are abundant. For equines there are several different certificate programs for working under the AAI umbrella with people. There is a myriad of resources for therapy dog and equine training, but usually not for unique species.

The second most popular pet in the United States are cats. In the past there wasn’t much information out there beyond litter box training or how to deal with other common behavior issues for cats.

Currently, there are several general online options for training a cat beyond the basic behavior issues. They usually focus on enrichment activities, agility or doing tricks. Examples of

this type of online training programs for cats, are the *Karen Pryor Academy* and *Cat School*. It is difficult to find comprehensive information on how to train and prepare a cat specifically for therapy work.

Rabbits are a very popular pet in the United States as well. The House Rabbit Society is a three-decades-old international non-profit animal welfare organization. The group is a good resource for “bunny basics” and other best practices regarding having a rabbit as a pet.

About two decades ago, different rabbit organizations in the United States started exploring and offering training for rabbit agility, rabbit hopping, and tricks. However, as with cats, it is difficult to find information on how to assess a rabbit’s aptitude for therapy work and then acquire information on how to train them for it.

There are several organizations that offer therapy evaluations for species other than dogs, but the “how to” part of acquiring the skills required for evaluation or training are up to the handler. Working through this checklist is a good place to start!

Getting Started in AAI Work with Unique Species

1. *Consult with your animal’s veterinarian and get their input on your animal’s aptitude for therapy work and any health or zoonotic concerns.*

They may have training suggestions or be able to connect you with someone who is doing therapy work with that species.

It is important to apply positive training techniques only! For many unique species it takes a lot of patience and time to train them.

2. *Bond with your animal!*

Developing and earning their trust is the most important “training” you can do! Each species and individual animal will be different with how long this might take. Engage in fun activities or quiet time with your animal. They need to live in a space where you can interact with them frequently throughout the day.

Many prey animals mask their stress, as that is how they are hard wired to survive. During AAI sessions animals should be removed from the situation even if showing only subtle stress responses, or be able to make a choice if they want to continue.

3. *Spend time with your animal.*

It is critical that you spend a significant amount of time with your animal and really get to know them, earning their trust. The practice of spending time with your animal continues for as long as they are in your life, not just to prepare for an evaluation or AAI sessions.

4. Desensitize an animal to traveling in a crate or other types of transportation

The only time many species travel in their crate is to visit the vet or to be left at a boarding facility. Both environments are usually fairly negative experiences for animals in general. An animal may associate their crate with taking them to unpleasant and scary places and be concerned about going into it.

It isn't best practice to put in all of the work needed to train an animal for therapy work, just to put them in their crate, trailer or van, when traveling to an AAI visit and have them arrive totally stressed out.

Positive crate/carrier/trailer or van training is critical! A good place to find some tips is on the internet, especially on YouTube. Search for the species you are working with and apply the terms crate, carrier or travel cage, (used more for birds) or trailers/vans for miniature equines, to access more information.

Here are some general tips for success in crate training the smaller unique species:

- a. Have the crate available 24/7, utilizing treats, toys, making it a safe and comfortable place the animal can choose to go to. All things positive happen in and around the crate!
- b. Less is more. Gradually add different levels during this desensitization process. An example of a typical progression might be: closing the door when the animal is in the crate and opening it again, increasing the amount of time the door is closed, add lifting the crate and setting it down, walking with the animal in the crate, setting it in the car and securing it, then setting it in a car that has the motor running for a few minutes, then longer, next try a short five minute drive, increase the amount of driving time slowly and avoid sharp turns where the animal slides back and forth, etc. Remember to have an extra special treat or favorite toy in the crate, and praise your animal during this entire process letting them know what a good job they are doing. Each time an animal practices working with their crate, they know that they will be returned home safely.

5. Socialize your animal with all different ages and types of people that may visit at your home.

It is important for your animal to be socialized with a variety of people. Here are some tips:

- a. Have each person that visits, just sit in a room and have a quiet conversation with you, ignoring your animal. Let your animal decide if they want to interact with them.
- b. Instruct the person how to play with or pet your animal if they choose to interact with the person that is visiting. Have your animal associate each interaction with lots of positive reinforcement from you, such as praise, treats, playtime or petting.
- c. Desensitize your animal to gently touching them all over their body. You should handle the animal first. Handle their feet, ears, mouth, until they are relaxed and accepting of this. Then, have another person in the family, or a friend they know, try handling them in the same way a little at a time, until they are comfortable with different people handling

them. This type of training will help them feel more comfortable at the vet and during grooming sessions too.

Note: Tellington TTouch is a technique that applies to most animals, from Orca whales to guinea pigs! It may be another “tool in your toolbox” for assistance in desensitizing an animal and reducing stress in a positive way. www.ttouch.com

6. *Desensitize your animal to different sights and sounds they may encounter outside of their home environment.*

There are apps (usually designed for dogs but can apply to other species) that offer a variety of common sounds heard in the community that you can download for a fee, to your electronic device. There are also a lot of sounds that can be found on the internet for no cost.

The technology isn't the same as hearing the real noise, such as a baby crying, but it at least exposes an animal to a sound that is similar. Animals can hear much more acutely than humans so have the sound coming softly from a different room. Play it only for a few seconds, working up to a little more time while treating and praising your animal. You can also have someone help make different soft noises in a different room such as on a musical instrument, clapping, pan dropping, etc.

It is important for your animal to be comfortable around common sights they will see outside the home too. They should be acclimated to all ages of people, and the differences between their appearances. Gradually add layers of visual stimuli one at a time for your animal, utilizing positive reinforcement for each visual experience they have. Engage your family or friends to try appearing in different apparel such as, a cowboy hat, wearing a hood up on a coat, face masks, non-scary Halloween masks, a long coat that is open, a scarf, dangling earrings, etc.

Clicker training is one way to get animals used to different things in the environment and again partnering with another trainer who knows the animal and species is very useful.

If you can access medical equipment for your animal to observe, that is great. If not readily available, from a distance, try using a broom to mimic a cane, a wheeled suitcase or hand cart as moving janitorial carts, an office chair that rolls imitating a wheel chair, etc. Remember to use positive reinforcement each time your animal experiences seeing any type of equipment that they are not familiar with.

The next step is to gradually add the different layers of stimuli until it resembles a real-life situation. For example, have someone approach your animal wearing a hat, using a cane, and talking loudly. Have someone mimic crying, extreme anxiety, incongruent emotions (say I am not mad or sad, yet behavior demonstrates otherwise).

It is important to observe your animal throughout this type of desensitization training for any adverse response and stop immediately at any sign of stress. If this happens, start at the level that they were comfortable with and practice at that level before adding more layers.

Decide if your small animal is going to wear a harness and leash for AAI work and desensitize them to wearing one. The internet has information, especially on YouTube for how to acclimate a variety of species to wearing a harness.

Miniature equines should be comfortable in a halter and walking on a lead rope.

Next Step: Research the benefits of getting evaluated for therapy work with an organization that tests species other than dogs.

Evaluation Options for Unique Species

To test or not to test, that is the question! There are many reasons to have someone evaluate your animal on a regular basis, even if your liability insurance doesn't require it (see discussion of liability under Legal Considerations on page 2).

There are non-profit organizations that will evaluate several types of unique species for therapy work. Volunteers with those organizations have liability insurance through them when they are out volunteering.

If an incident happened during an AAI session while the practitioner was at work and legal issues resulted, it may demonstrate best practice if the animal was registered with a therapy animal group.

The court system might recognize the effort the practitioner put into training and evaluating the animal for therapy work specifically, instead of just viewing the animal as a personal pet.

AAI practitioners should engage in continuing education via webinars, workshops, online courses, certification programs for animal related studies, professional social media groups, refresher training classes, and/or regular behavior and wellness evaluations.

One of the benefits of having your animal evaluated for therapy work is to receive objective feedback from someone experienced with that species. Often, they will observe something that you have not noticed. They may have insight into your animal's behavior, handling tips, and other valuable information. Practitioners that have senior animals may appreciate an objective evaluator discussing retirement for their animal based on what behaviors were observed during the evaluation.

Veterinarians

If there aren't any therapy animal evaluations offered in your specific area, another option may be to have a veterinarian that has expertise with that species, assess the individual animal's aptitude and wellness for therapy work on a regular basis, making sure to document their input at each visit.

A regular wellness check with a veterinarian who is experienced with the species an AAI practitioner is working with, is very important. Many species are prey animals and they can mask an illness. A qualified veterinarian should be able to answer questions about behaviors, including

sharing information on stress responses. Many organizations will require a vet check, but it is the handler's responsibility to ask questions and learn as much as they can from the veterinarian about their animal. Adding routine veterinarian care is important for animals that participate in AAI. Wellness checks for animals including staying current with vaccinations and other preventative care aligns with best practices in AAI and animal welfare.

Organizations that Test Unique Species

Note: At the time this document was created, the organizations listed below were able to assist in testing unique species. The purpose of posting a sample of organizations that test unique species is to bring awareness to practitioners that there may be evaluations available near them. An internet search may reveal some testing opportunities in your geographic area that are not widely advertised.

The authors do not recommend or endorse any of the organizations listed below. Due diligence on the part of the practitioner is important to assess if a therapy animal evaluation via a specific organization works best for them.

National or Regional Organizations that Evaluate Unique Species

Note: Organizations for Equine Assisted Therapy are listed under the resources section.

Love On a Leash

"Love On A Leash® is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to providing an avenue for volunteer pet therapy teams to engage in meaningful and productive animal assisted therapy." - (from the website)

Love On A Leash® has chapters in many states and alternate options for evaluating for those states without any chapters.

Species Evaluated: dogs, cats and rabbits

Website: loveonaleash.org/

Paws For People

"The "PAWS" in Paws for People stands for "pet-assisted visitation volunteer services." This organization is the largest of its kind in the Mid-Atlantic area, serving Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland." – (from the website)

Species Evaluated: dogs, cats and rabbits

Website: pawsforpeople.org

Pet Partners®

Pet Partners® is a national non-profit organization. They are represented in every state, plus fifteen other countries as well. There are free webinars available via their website to learn the requirements needed for unique species to become registered with this therapy animal organization.

There are opportunities for practitioners or volunteers with unique species for certification in Animal-Assisted Crisis Response or to join the Read With Me[®], Walk With Me[®] programs.

Species Evaluated: dogs, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs, domestic rats, miniature equines, llamas/alpacas, some birds and pigs.

Website: petpartners.org

Intermountain Therapy Animals[®] (ITA)

ITA is a national non-profit organization that operates in Utah, Montana and Idaho. It is also represented in many international countries. ITA developed the national R.E.A.D.[®] (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) Program that accepts many species other than dogs, that are registered as therapy animals.

Species Evaluated: birds, rabbits, goats, domestic rats, hamsters, guinea pigs, ducks and chickens, miniature pigs, llamas, cows and equines

ITA has affiliates in other states that may be able to evaluate some unique species also, such as in Connecticut, Tennessee or Texas.

Website: therapyanimals.org

“

“Pocket Pets” and Rabbits as Therapy Animals

“Pocket Pets” and rabbits, may prove to be great partners for the AAI work that you do! It is helpful to know all that you can about a species before acquiring an animal or partnering with one. There are some important pros and cons to take into consideration if you are thinking about working with any small animals in the Rodentia (rodents), Mustelid (ferrets) or Lagomorph (rabbits) families.

Note: There is some debate in the scientific world whether guinea pigs are rodents or not, and if they should have their own classification, but that is yet to be determined.

Some of the more commonly known “pocket pets” are hamsters, guinea pigs, ferrets, chinchillas, domestic mice or rats, and gerbils. This list is not complete by any means, but they are some of the more popular rodent type animals that are kept as pets.

Pros and Cons of “Pocket Pets” and Rabbits as AAI Animals

Pros

- They are small and in general, live in a contained space.
- They are easier to keep and care for than most of the larger animals.
- They may be less expensive to care for than many other animals.
- They are interesting to view in their habitat as they engage with enrichment opportunities or other animals that they live with.

- There are some species that can be very affiliative (after an animal is humanely cared for and properly socialized) with humans.
- People that are allergic to cats or dogs, may be able to engage with them.
- People that are afraid of larger animals or have had bad experiences with them, may enjoy engaging with a smaller animal.
- They live indoors, so no need to have to exercise them outdoors in cold or inclement weather.
- There is some research that indicates guinea pigs may increase social functioning in an elementary school classroom and potentially a social buffer to children with autism.
- Guinea pigs and rabbits are a novelty as most people don't interact with these types of animals very often.

Cons

- Pocket pets and rabbits are prey animals and can be easily startled, which may cause injury to the animal or the human (bites or scratches).
- Pocket pets and rabbits require veterinarian care from exotic pet specialists which can be very expensive.
- The species listed above may mask their illness until they are really sick and sometimes may suddenly die.
- They are sensitive to temperatures, drafts, humidity, etc. and can easily become ill if not cared for or transported properly.
- They don't live as long as other types of common pets, such as dogs or cats.
- They can easily be hurt by getting lost in a building, squeezed, dropped, stepped on or attacked by a resident dog or cat.
- Guinea pigs and rabbits require daily feedings of fresh, dark greens and vegetables;
- Guinea pigs and rabbits need a surprisingly large, predator and temperature safe place to live in that is draft free. The pet store cages are an inadequate size for either of these species. Appropriate housing can be costly to construct or obtain. *Refer to the resource section for "Pocket Pets and Rabbits" for more information on appropriate housing.*
- Except for hamsters that usually live alone, the other pocket pets and rabbits have a better quality of life with a companion of their same species. Like humans, not all individuals get along with each other, so best to look for an already bonded pair. Some guinea pigs and rabbits that get a lot of attention and have interactions with their caregiver on a regular basis, may readily adjust to living alone.
- There can be zoonotic issues. The CDC lists certain pocket pets and rabbits as having the potential to transmit any of the following: Pasteurella, Ringworm, Salmonella, Campylobacter, Cheyletiella Mites or Rat Bite Fever (specific to rats) plus more. As with all animals it is important to sanitize your hands before and after handling.
- If you work with people during the day, most of the "Pocket Pets" are very sleepy and do not like being handled during their napping hours.

- Allergies for humans can be an issue

Note:

Crepuscular Animals: (most active during dawn and dusk) chinchillas, ferrets and rabbits

Diurnal: (most active during the day) guinea pigs

*Nocturnal: (most active during the **night**) rats, mice, hamsters and gerbils*

Physical Facts about Guinea Pigs (Cavies) and Rabbits

Guinea pigs and domestic rabbits are two species that have been aligned together for years within several national and regional organizations that breed, show and/or compete in agility with their animals. Some examples are: the American Rabbit Breeding Association (ARBA. The organization includes both rabbit and cavy enthusiasts), American Hopping Association for Rabbits and Cavies (AHARC), 4-H Rabbit and Cavy Projects, etc.

These two species are more similar to each other than they are to the other “pocket pets” listed previously. They can be affiliative with people (depending on the individual animal of course) and may enjoy getting petted. Many of them enjoy learning new behaviors and enjoy doing tricks or commands as in rabbit agility.

Guinea pigs or rabbits may be good candidates as therapy animal partners for practitioners wanting to incorporate smaller animals into their AAI practice.

Guinea Pigs

Sight: With eyes on the sides of their heads, Guinea pigs can see in front of them and to their sides, without having to move. They have very poor depth perception and can fall off a higher surface very easily. Guinea pigs are the only rodents that can see all the colors humans can.

Hearing: A guinea pig is more similar to people’s hearing range, although at a little higher frequency, than mice or rats. They startle very easily with sudden or loud noises, and can be prone to noise injury as a result.

Smell: Guinea pigs have a sense of smell that is 25 times better than humans.

Taste: A guinea pig’s sense of taste and smell is very highly developed. They use smell to communicate with each other and can taste whether things are good or bad for them to eat.

Note: Guinea pigs do not have flexible backs. Placing them inside a transparent ball designed for other types of rodents to roll around in, may cause damage to their spine and back legs.

Rabbits

Sight: Like hamsters, rabbits have large round eyes located on the sides and upper part of their head. Each eye can see more than a half of a circle, enabling them to see in every direction at the same time. Rabbits can see moving objects from very far distances and will flee at the first hint of danger. They can't see that well directly in front of them and can only see the colors blue and green.

Hearing: A rabbit's hearing is its most vital sense. The rabbit is able to get a sense of its surroundings by detecting sound waves that bounce off of objects in its environment.

Smell: A rabbit's sense of smell is 20 times better than a human.

Taste: Like humans, rabbits have the ability to distinguish between sweet, sour, bitter and salty tastes. This is due to the thousands of taste buds located in the mouth and pharynx. In the wild, rabbits are able to distinguish between toxic and non-toxic plants, but pet rabbits can lose this ability, so be aware of the types of plants you have in your house.

Note: Both guinea pigs and rabbits make special fecal matter called "cecotropes" that they ingest. It is their version of a vitamin pill and is necessary to keep them healthy.

Signs of Stress

Guinea pigs and rabbits can become stressed by sudden changes in water, food, or bedding. Guinea pigs display symptoms of stress in ways similar to other mammals. They can become increasingly susceptible to disease, they can become irritable and aggressive or the reverse, depressed and less active. They may also develop diarrhea and consequently lose weight, drink more water, and become listless. These may also be signs of an underlying illness. Small prey animals mask illnesses, so for example, if they don't eat for a day or more it could be a sign of something serious and you should consult their veterinarian.

Note: Familiarize yourself with different types of behaviors that are common to these types of animals. YouTube is a great source for viewing videos of a variety of behaviors for many species.

General Guidelines for Interacting with an Unfamiliar Guinea Pig or Rabbit

1. Let them know that you are in the room by calling out in a low, calming voice.
2. They startle easily, so just be present for a moment near them and talk to them.
3. Avoid moving quickly and picking them up with a "hawk" hand (moving your hand over the animal in order to catch them)
4. Rabbits don't like being touched near their throat as that is where the "kill" bite lands from predators that hunt them.
5. Be purposeful and have a firm (not overly tight) grip when you pick them up.
6. Support all four feet firmly! You may also choose to have a polar fleece blanket or soft cat/dog bed to place them in for support and also for any droppings.
7. Always put rabbits/guinea pigs into their crate or back into their cage with their hindquarters going in first. Both species may try to jump out of your hands and can easily injure their backs. Many handlers use a "cat crate" that opens on the top and is big enough for the animal to move around in it safely.
8. Don't ever put a guinea pig on their back as that is terrifying for them.
9. Research has shown that putting a rabbit on its back or in a "trance", (scientifically called, "tonic immobility") may be harmful to them.

10. Secure the room you are working in when participating in AAI. The doors should be shut when working with small animals. Provide a choice for the animal by making sure there is a safe “house” they can go into as needed. Cover up any small spaces that they may get stuck or lost in.
11. If there are other animals in the building, especially predators, make sure the handler knows to secure them during the time period that the small animals will be out. No surprises!
12. Guinea pigs have poor depth perception and will fall off a chair or table and get hurt. Rabbits also enjoy hopping on and off furniture, which could injure them. Working with a guinea pig or rabbit inside their exercise pen on the floor may be the safest environment for them during an AAI session.
13. The small furry animals overheat really easily, especially rabbits. Anything over seventy degrees or lower than sixty degrees should be monitored. Make sure water is readily accessible and that the temperature is controlled.
14. When transporting a guinea pig or rabbit during hot temperatures, make sure to have a cooler with a few hard ice packs in it that you can use for emergencies. An example would be if the car breaks down. Wrap an ice pack in a towel to put under the animal’s bedding to keep them comfortable during this type of situation.
15. In freezing cold temperatures, keep some hand warmer packs ready, wrapping them up in a towel placing them under the animal’s bedding to keep them warm. This is a suggestion only in the case of an emergency when the temperatures are dropping and out of your control.

Examples of Stress Signs in Guinea Pigs (examples from least to most stressed)

- Constantly moving
- Moving around in a repetitive circle
- Increased shedding
- Increased urination/defecation
- Pushes hand away
- Usually takes a treat, but doesn’t
- Trying to hide
- Distressed vocalization
- Raises up on stiff legs
- Clacking their teeth
- Freezing
- Shows teeth
- Biting

Examples of Stress Signs in Rabbits (examples from least to most stressed)

- Licking lips
- Shedding/Grooming

- Yawning
- Pushes hand away
- Grinding teeth
- Increased pellet production/urination
- Thumping a foot
- Flinches when touched
- Rapid respiration
- “Flat” bunny/freeze/ears laid back/tense body
- Growling or squeaking
- Charging

Note: The stress lists provided for guinea pigs and rabbits are just an example of some of the more common ones for these two species. Each individual animal is unique and may either mask their stress or exhibit it in a different way.

Pocket Pets and Rabbit Resources:

House Rabbit Society – rabbit.org

Humane Society of the United States - Resources on assessing if a rabbit is a fit for you, how to select one and tips on setting up your home for one. humanesociety.org/animals/rabbits

Pawfiler® - <https://apellc.square.site/>

This is a product that was designed for matching animals (dogs, cats or rabbits) with suitable adopters. The computer software generates a general personality profile for the animal, from six different categories. This program may also be helpful in identifying your current animal’s personality profile to assist in determining if they might enjoy AAI activities.

Guinea Pig Forum - theguineapigforum.co.uk

Guinea Pig Cages - Practical information on appropriate housing and other care for guinea pigs. guineapigcages.com

Piggy Bedspreads – C&C cages, plus attractive and quality bedding piggybedspreads.com

Guinea Lynx – a medical and care guide for guinea pigs. guinealynx.info

Guinea Dad – An informative series of blogs with unique information about guinea pigs. guineadad.com/

Oxbow Animal Health: Resources for both species and how to find an exotic animal veterinarian in your area. oxbowanimalhealth.com

Cats as Therapy Animals

The origins of the domestic house cat began about 12,000 years ago, in ancient Egypt. According to Smithsonian Magazine, there are approximately 90 million cats living in homes across the

United States. Cats are one of the top three most popular pets in the U.S. Their popularity throughout history might be summed up with this quote by Sigmund Freud: “Time spent with cats is never wasted.”

If you are thinking of partnering with a cat for AAI work, please read through all of the information in this entire document. Acquiring a cat, is a big commitment, as their average life span is between 15 and 17 years. In comparison to dogs there aren’t as many cats involved in AAI. For example, Pet Partners (a national non-profit therapy animal organization) has over ten times the number of dog teams as there are cat teams.

There are cats that enjoy interacting with people and would be good candidates for AAI.

When assessing the viability of partnering in AAI with a cat, please remember this quote:

“Cats don’t like change without their consent!” - Roger Caras

Pros and Cons of Cats as AAI Animals

Pros

- Specific cats can be very affiliative with people
- Cats can learn specific skills through positive training, if they choose to
- Many people prefer cats over other types of pets
- Cats are litter box trained so can remain indoors to use the “bathroom” during inclement weather or when needed.
- Cats in general are quiet which can be more calming than a noisier animal
- Cats can live a long time, some often into their twenties
- Cats don’t need to go outside for daily walks, although enrichment opportunities should be provided for them.
- According to the ASPCA, cats in general are less costly to own than a medium to large dog
- Cats in general need less grooming than most dogs
- Living with a cat may make you healthier! According to research posted by the National Institute of Health, petting a cat can lower the risk of stroke or heart disease by approximately thirty percent and lower blood pressure. Their purring has healing properties for bones and muscles and if a child under a year of age lives with a cat, they have fewer allergies in the future.
- Cats are independent and curious by nature. They have some unique behaviors compared to other pets. It can be interesting to observe or interact with them as they engage with their environment.

Cons

- Cats can have a long-life span. Assess your commitment to an animal that may live up to fifteen years or more.
- Cats can negatively impact their physical environment through shedding, marking, or damaging the furniture, etc.

- Depending on the facility requirements for practitioners, or the organization you volunteer with, some cats must learn to accept wearing a harness and leash while doing AAI work.
- Cats are cats, and some may reject wearing a harness and leash if that is required.
- Cats have to be acclimated to traveling in a crate, which may be difficult for some cats.
- Cats can become ill and have expensive veterinarian bills.
- Cat allergies are twice as common as dog allergies, according to the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology.
- Cats (as with all animals) may transmit zoonotic diseases. Some concerns specific to cats, may be CSD (Cat Scratch Disease) and Toxoplasmosis which can negatively affect pregnant women.
- Cats are crepuscular animals, which means they are awake more at dawn and at dusk. They sleep on average of about 15 hours a day. The time period that AAI visits or sessions are planned may be restricted, as it depends on the individual cat.
- Cats in general enjoy shorter AAI sessions or visits than dogs, and engaging less frequently.
- Some cats may have petting-induced aggression.
- Cats can scratch and bite with little warning.

Note: Cats that have been declawed are at risk of pain, surgical complications, may bite more often or develop other behavior issues. This information is according to the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Physical Facts about Cats

Cats utilize five senses to navigate their world. They are: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. Humans have the same five senses, but cats use their senses very differently.

Sight:

- Cats have movement detectors in their eyes, that they use to help catch their prey with. They have night vision but can't see in total darkness. Cats can also see in ultraviolet light which humans can't.
- Seeing something clearly at a distance is difficult for them. Cats can see blue and green colors, but other colors like red or pink, might be seen by them as different tones of green, while purple may translate to shades of blue instead.
- Cats have a third eyelid on each eye that helps to moisturize their eyes and protects them from tall grasses while they are hunting their prey.

Hearing:

Wouldn't it be great in order to hear something better to be able to swivel our ears independently from each other or rotate them 180 degrees? Cats can do that! They also can hear more frequencies than most mammals, including some ultrasonic sounds.

To aid them in hunting, they can often distinguish sounds that are made several inches apart from each other. Often a cat will turn their head in the direction of the sound and apply their vision to whatever made the noise as well. They can hear pitches one octave higher than that of the average dog.

Some more recent studies have indicated that certain cats respond well to music that has been composed for species-specific frequencies.

Smell:

A cat's sense of vision is secondary to their sense of smell when processing their environment. Humans have approximately 5 million odor sensors in their noses, but cats have 200 million. Cats have a sense of smell that is more acute and approximately 9-16 times better than a person.

When you enter a home that has a cat, many will come over to you and get a good sniff, gathering information on whether they want to interact with you or not. Unfamiliar smells or another cat smell on that person may make the cat very wary.

A behavior connected to the scent organ that is in the roof of a cat's mouth is called the Flehmen Response and is unique to several types of mammals. It may look like the cat is "gaping" with its mouth wide open. The cat is trying to open their passage to their scent organ in order to get more information about something they are interested in.

Taste

The sense of taste is not a cat's "super power". It is the weakest of their senses as they have only 473 taste buds compared to dogs that have 1,700 and humans have 9,000.

Cats are carnivores, preferring food that has fat and protein in it. They are notorious for being "picky" eaters, which has served them well in the wild so that they don't eat anything toxic.

Cats don't have a sweet tooth and get plenty of salt through their meat heavy diets. Their sense of smell is used more frequently to decide on whether or not to eat a certain food.

Touch

Never cut or trim a cat's whiskers as they are needed to provide an array of sensory information in order to help them navigate the world. Whiskers are very sensitive. They are located around a cat's mouth, above each eye and on the backs of their front paws.

Whiskers are important in providing information on the weather, wind and other changes in the environment too. They are sensitive to the touch as well.

From birth, touch is important to new kittens. They will groom each other and cozy up to each other. It is a sign of affection. Young kittens that are handled in a positive way by humans usually tolerate or enjoy petting more than those that did not have that early contact.

Examples of Stress Signs in Cats (examples from least to most stressed)

Cats are easily stressed even with simple changes in their environment, such as rearranging the furniture where they live. It is important to know the individual cat's personality and threshold for interacting with people and their environment. The following list is not complete, but is a quick glance at stress responses cats may exhibit to some degree.

- Avoids eye contact by looking away
- Furrowed brow
- Yawning
- Ears twitching
- Tail flicks
- Ears pointed more to the side
- Suddenly grooming excessively
- Hiding
- Ears back
- Dilated pupils
- Fast switching tail
- Scratching
- Whiskers pulled back
- Hair raised on tail to look "puffy"
- Body flattened
- Back arched
- Piloerection (raised fur)
- Hissing
- Spitting
- Growling
- Biting

General Guidelines for Interacting with an Unfamiliar Cat

1. Ask the person that knows the cat, what the best way is to interact with their animal.
 2. Take three, slow, deep breaths before entering the room with the cat, so that you are calm and relaxed.
 3. Sanitize your hands from other smells, washing them with something first that is unscented.
 4. Avoid staring at the cat, but act natural, not "creepy".
 5. Avoid talking loudly or excitedly.
 6. Avoid fast body movements of any kind.
 7. Let the cat choose to interact with you and come into your space.
 8. Try putting one finger out (keeping it still) to let the cat sniff it.
 9. Avoid reaching out to pet right away, let the cat smell the back of your hand first.
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10. Many cats enjoy being petted on the head or neck. Avoid petting the other areas of their body unless otherwise instructed by the person that knows the cat.
11. Petting slowly with the back of the hand may be less threatening.
12. Do not pet them for an extended amount of time, keep it brief
13. Set a treat on the floor (one you know that cat likes) near you. It helps them associate that something good happens, when being close to you.
14. Engage in some play time with the cat, using their favorite toy.

Cat Resources:

Getting in TTouch With Your Cat – Linda Tellington Jones

I-Cat (International Cat-Assisted Therapy) Facebook Group

Note: This group is for handlers and their therapy cats in training, active and retired.

Cat Vision – An app for your cell phone that shows the room you are in and what colors the cat sees it in

Birds as Therapy Animals

The history of people keeping birds as pets, dates back to the Sumerians starting in the year 4100 BCE. Many types of birds have been kept as pets throughout the centuries on many different continents.

There is some controversy over whether or not birds that are currently bred in captivity are domesticated animals versus those that are caught in the wild. Even though there have been different types of birds as pets over many thousands of years, there is strong support still recognizing them as wild, even those that have been bred in captivity.

In alignment with the “Position Statement on Animal Welfare in Animal-Assisted Interventions”, no animal should be captured in the wild to be someone’s pet, and definitely not utilized in an AAI setting. Capturing a wild animal for this purpose would violate the Five Freedoms as stated in Animal Welfare in this document.

Birds are amazing animals that take a lot of patience and time to bond and work with. They can be noisy, messy, unpredictable and aggressive to the point of causing serious injury. Many birds that are bored or those living in an inappropriate environment, can hurt themselves and have other disconcerting and harmful behaviors.

Several species of parrots can live fifty years or longer and potentially may even outlive their owner. It can be a life-long commitment to have certain types of birds as a pet.

It is estimated that approximately 5 million households in the U.S. have pet birds. Many birds in the parrot family especially, can be very interactive with humans, and are entertaining to watch as well. With a proper living environment, positive interactions and training, there are

birds that enjoy participating in AAI activities. It can be an enrichment opportunity for them that keeps them mentally active and alert.

A bird that does AAI work should have a strong relationship with their person, be calm in mildly stressful situations, be non-aggressive to people and other animals and enjoy being touched.

The Rock Doves (domestic pigeons) can make a good “starter” bird for someone that wants a bird as a pet. These types of birds don’t chew, aren’t that loud when vocalizing, and can be affiliative with people. Their life span is ten to fifteen years as compared to fifty years or more for some types of parrots.

Cockatiels can also be very affiliative with people, and often enjoy imitating sounds which is fun, but can also be fairly noisy too. Their life span is also ten to fifteen years.

Chickens are another type of bird that may be appropriate for AAI. Many cities in the United States have amended their city ordinances to allow them to live in urban areas.

There are some research studies that show how people can benefit from interacting with a chicken. People often report feeling less anxious and calmer afterwards. Chickens are also reported to be fairly empathetic to humans and their emotions and will respond accordingly.

If you are thinking about partnering with a bird for AAI work, please do your homework! A deep dive into researching if a bird is a good fit and what is involved with having this type of pet in your life is critical.

Pros and Cons of Birds as AAI Animals

Pros

- Many birds have a high degree of intelligence
- Many birds enjoy learning new tricks or tasks
- Birds are flock animals and very social. Some can be very affiliative with people
- Birds often sing and may mimic sounds, including human voices.
- Many birds have beautifully colored feathers and are pleasing to look at.
- In comparison to dogs and cats, birds are relatively inexpensive to feed.
- Birds do not need to go outdoors to exercise.
- Many types of birds have a long-life span
- Birds require minimal grooming
- Birds live in a self-contained space, which is easier to keep clean
- Depending on the type of bird, they can wear a flight suit (reusable pet bird diapers)
- Birds can be transported in a sturdy carrier.

Cons

- Birds (especially those in the parrot family) may live a long time. Some up to 50 or more years.

- Parrots in particular can be demanding and time consuming.
- Birds that become bored or depressed can be self-destructive or aggressive to humans.
- Birds need a lot of space.
- Birds need daily enrichment and exercise opportunities which can be time consuming.
- Even when bred in captivity, many pet birds are still considered wild
- Being confined may cause serious emotional issues in some birds.
- Birds can be very messy
- Birds can be very noisy.
- Birds are fragile animals and can become easily sick or hurt.
- Healthcare for birds can be expensive.
- A significant number of people are allergic to feathers.
- Birds that can wear a flight suit often take a lot of time to adjust to it and some refuse to wear one.

Physical Facts about Pet Birds

Sight

Birds in general have better eyesight than humans.

Birds can see different colors such as blue, red, green and UV too!

Birds such as parrots and pigeons can focus each eye on different objects. This is called monocular vision and helps them survive in their environment.

Many birds have two eyelids and some even have a third membrane.

Quality lighting is important for many birds. It can irritate them while resting or sleeping if the light flickers, or is not the correct strength, and can lead to stress which may then cause behavioral issues.

Eye pinning is a form of non-verbal communication generally found in parrots. It is when the pupil of their eye dilates and contracts. They can control this and use it to express a variety of emotional responses such as being afraid, excited, irritated, happy or angry.

Birds are very adept at seeing slight movements and changes in their environment which helps them avoid predators.

Birds that bob their heads may be trying to stabilize an image that they are seeing or improve their depth perception. Head bobbing may also be a bird's way of expressing their feelings too, such as being hungry, wanting attention, being stressed or excited.

Most birds have eyes on the sides of the head which allows them to have a wider field of vision than humans. Birds may have a range in excess of 340 degrees as in comparison to humans at approximately 180 degrees.

Hearing

Humans and birds have roughly the same range of hearing, between 1kHz (kilohertz) and 4 kHz.

Birds have absolute pitch which means they can recognize sounds that are certain pitches. They do not have relative pitch, so can't recognize the same song done in a different octave or in a different key.

Most birds will turn their head when determining the source of a sound.

Many mammals, including humans have ears that are attached on the outside of their head that assist in hearing sounds. Birds hearing function is similar to mammals and humans, with the exception of having openings in the side of their head instead of attached ears.

The auriculars are soft feathers that protect a bird's ears, especially from loud noises and the wind.

Smell

There is a round mass of tissues that process different scents, called an olfactory bulb. Birds have this bulb built into their beaks. The extent that a bird can detect scents, varies between different types of birds. Birds rely more heavily on their sight and hearing senses to navigate their world.

According to some experts, a bird's sense of smell may alert them to inclement weather, or assist in finding their flock during migration.

Since birds do have a sense of smell, their living area especially should be free of strong scents, especially any type of chemical odors.

Taste

Humans around the world enjoy many culinary tastes. Birds do not have a strong sense of taste as they only have about 100 or less taste buds compared to humans who have approximately 10,000.

Birds can differentiate between different types of foods and can have their favorites.

Birds can identify chemical or rancid tastes, and disregard that food source. Sometimes instead of the taste, it might depend on how the food feels in their mouth if they choose not to eat it.

Touch

The feathers on birds are very sensitive to the degree of wind and changing air temperatures. There are nerve endings at the base of each feather which can cause pain when they are disturbed.

Birds' feet and legs often have very few nerve endings which allows them to perch during cold weather without feeling any discomfort.

Many birds enjoy preening another bird, especially during a courtship, which is an important way they experience touch.

When birds are over- heated, they may cool off by bathing in water or by holding their wings out.

Some birds are very sensitive on their beaks, especially those that use them more frequently to poke around and search for their food.

Examples of Stress Signs in Pet Birds (examples from least to most stressed)

- Changes in typical types of vocalizations
- Looking away
- Moving away from the person
- Looking like they might take flight
- Decreased responsiveness
- Stereotypical behaviors
- Change in eating habits
- Fluffed Feathers
- Increased volume in vocalizations
- Feather picking
- Preening
- Lunging or charging
- Biting

Note: The list above is just an example of some of the more common stress responses pet birds may have in general. Each individual animal is unique and may either mask their stress or exhibit it in a different way.

General Guidelines for Interacting with an Unfamiliar Bird

1. Avoid quick movements as that might startle the bird
2. Let them acclimate to you being in the room
3. Avoid direct staring as that may mimic a predator
4. Don't wear dangling jewelry as the bird may play with it
5. Speak softly and in a lower tone of voice
6. Offer a treat (as directed by the handler)
7. Ask the handler instructions on where and how to pet their bird
8. In general, never pet below a bird's neck
9. Having a bird learn to "step up" on someone's finger is safer than having them perch on their shoulder.
10. Interact with the bird with a whistle, song or game that they know

Bird Resources

Association of Avian Veterinarians -aav.org – There are a variety of resources available, including finding a qualified Avian Veterinarian.

The Gabriel Foundation is a 501(C)(3) avicultural and veterinary affiliated parrot welfare organization in Colorado that is a resource for people interested in parrots.

www.thegabrielfoundation.org

The International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC) elevates animal behavior consulting and training worldwide through ethical standards and the effective use of Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive (LIMA) practices. - www.IAABC.org

World Parrot Trust – This is an educational organization that assists with global efforts to protect wild parrots and to support companion parrot caregivers. parrots.org

Serenity Park (Frazier Park, CA) “The Serenity Park program serves as an oasis for abandoned, abused, neglected or family relinquished parrots in need of a forever home. Here these often-traumatized parrots meet combat veterans who also experienced trauma.

www.lockwoodarc.org/serenity-park

“Getting Started: Clicker Training for Birds Kit” –Book by Karen Pryor, (published 2005) This book is about the inspiring true story about the bonds between wounded warriors and forlorn parrots who are both healing at Serenity Park in California.

Note: A special thanks to Peter Amelia at “Taking Wing Consulting” for his contribution to the bird section for this document.

Miniature Equines as Therapy Animals

Miniature Horses and Miniature Donkeys have quickly risen in popularity as pets over the past few decades in the United States. Their compact size, intelligent nature and cute appearance have stolen the hearts of equine enthusiasts everywhere.

According to the AMHA (American Miniature Horse Association) there are approximately 114,000 Miniature Horses registered in America, with many more existing that are not registered.

The Miniature Donkey Association in the United States estimates about 15,000 Miniature Donkeys, with many more that may not have been counted.

The Miniature Horses were first bred as a novelty for the “Zoo of Bizarre Animals” owned by Louis (XIV) of France in the early 1600s. By the 1700’s in Europe, many people owned them as a pet. They were bred from regular horses that focused on breeding practices that reduced their sizes.

Miniature Donkeys are an actual breed called the “Miniature Mediterranean Donkey”. They are now often just referred to in general as Miniature Donkeys”.

Both types of equines that were not kept as pets by wealthy aristocrats, were worked either hauling coal underground in the mines, or as pack animals carrying goods. The first miniature horses that were reported to have arrived in the U.S. was in 1861. Many were put to work in the coal mines where conditions were harsh and took its toll on them, until approximately the mid-1900’s. Today many miniature horses are beloved pets and may compete in a variety of events such as showmanship, pleasure driving, Liberty classes, etc.

The miniature equines may also be therapy animals that visit at a variety of venues such as hospitals, nursing homes, libraries or schools. Pet Partners is a non-profit organization (petpartners.org) that will register either of these two equines as therapy animals.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act’s (ADA) revision in 2010, only dogs can be acknowledged as a service animal for someone with a disability. However, in some cases with certain provisions, miniature horses that fit the ADA criteria can also be considered a service animal under this revision.

Miniature equines are unique types of animals that people have been reported to have responded well to in an AAI setting. As with any animal, someone that is interested in partnering with a mini equine for AAI work should thoroughly do their homework!

Pros and Cons of Miniature Equines as AAI Animals

Pros

- Miniature equines require less space than regular sized equines
- They eat less than a larger equine
- In general, they can be easy going and very affiliative with people.
- They are smart and like to learn
- People tend to be less afraid of them than other larger equine species
- Miniature equines are a novelty and attention getter when visiting in the community

Cons

- Miniature equines can be prone to health issues some of these are: colic, obesity, hyperlipidemia, dental or limb issues.
- They can founder (a hoof issue) if they eat rich grasses.
- They live outside and need a pasture, barn, fencing. It is recommended that each miniature horse has a quarter acre of land to live on comfortably.
- Regular pasture fencing sometimes needs to be adapted for miniature equines.
- Veterinary bills can be very expensive
- Safe transportation for a mini may be challenging. Some are transported in a horse trailer, others in a regular car or van.
- They are herd animals, so need to live with other animals similar to them.

- They can get seriously injured when living with larger horses or full-sized donkeys.
- They can seriously injure a person, especially when kicking out with both of their back legs.
- They are prey animals that may attract predators such as coyotes, wolves, mountain lions, large dogs, etc., so need to have a secure living area.

Physical Facts about Miniature Equines

Sight

Equines have panoramic vision! As a prey animal, sight is one of their most important senses. They can discern movement from several hundred yards away with the center of their eye focused on objects nearby and the outer part of the eye able to discern objects at a distance. They see the world in muted colors of brown, yellow, blue and gray. They can't see the color red. Their eyes are on the side of their head and they can see almost all the way around themselves, as they watch for any type of danger. They have several blind spots, one in front of their forehead, just above them and another directly behind them. They have to move their heads to get things into focus.

They can see better than humans at night, but it takes them about 15-20 minutes to adjust to the change in light, such as walking into a trailer that is dark. It might look totally like a black hole to an equine while they are trying to adjust to the lighting.

It is important to understand how an equine views the world in order to read their responses to stimuli accurately.

Hearing

Equines can hear a sound up to 4km away. They can hear higher pitches than humans so have a greater range. They can detect low frequency sounds while grazing, sensing the vibrations which helps alert them to predators. Unfamiliar noises may startle an equine or cause them to spook. Many equines when anxious about something, will respond well to the low, soothing voice of a human.

Humans have 3 muscles in their ears compared to an equine's 10 muscles. They can move each ear independently or together to zero in on a specific noise. The direction their ears are pointed in can indicate their emotional state.

Smell

An equine's large nostrils can take in air and process the smells that are taken in. They have a better sense of smell than humans but not quite as good as that of a dog. Their sense of smell helps them to find water, detect predators or other types of animals, or recognize people or equines they know.

Taste

As with humans, equines have four different tastes. They are: sweet, salty, bitter and acidic.

Equines that graze out in a field will separate out the choice grasses to eat based on how they taste. They will in general avoid more toxic plants, but if grazing is sparse, may also eat those.

The tip of their tongue is very sensitive and assists in sorting out the flavors. Equines usually prefer sweet or salty tastes over bitter or acidic.

Touch

Equines utilize their muzzles and mouth to navigate the world they live in. They use their mouths to graze, defend themselves in close quarters, nuzzle their young, scratch an itch with their teeth or pick up things, enjoying a favorite equine toy.

The body of an equine has many nerve endings which is why they can feel even a single fly land on them and then swish it away. Many equines enjoy a good rub down or grooming session, or a friendly pat.

Signs of Stress in Miniature Equines (examples from least to most stressed, not a complete list)

- Lip Licking
- Forward ear movement
- Yawning
- Moving away from something that concerns them
- Shaking their mane
- Eyes wide and blinking
- Head tossing
- Pawing or stomping the ground
- Tail Swishing (donkeys may tuck their tail)
- Fixed Gaze
- Flared Nostrils
- Withdrawn posture
- Unresponsiveness to people or other stimuli
- Stereotypies (repetitive behaviors with no apparent function)
- Ears pinned back
- Bared Teeth
- Kicking out in different directions
- Freezing in place
- Fleeing from stressful stimuli

General Guidelines for Interacting with an Unfamiliar Miniature Equine

1. Approach with confidence, talking in a calm voice to the miniature horse or miniature donkey
2. Approach them from the side, not from behind or in the front
3. Offer an outstretched arm and the back of your hand, allowing them to smell it

4. Avoid sudden movements or speaking in a loud voice, continue speaking calmly to them
5. Avoid direct eye contact or staring
6. Pet them on the side of their neck or shoulder with an open hand and with an easy rhythmic movement
7. Discontinue petting if they choose to move away, or show other signs of stress
8. Ask questions of the equine handler, don't assume things

Miniature Equine Resources

Pet Partners – A national non-profit therapy animal organization. Free webinar on “Volunteering with Your Horse” (miniature horse or miniature donkey) petpartners.org

AHMA – (American Miniature Horse Association) – A national registry that promotes the breed standard for miniature horses. – amha.org

METSA – (Miniature Equines Therapy Standards Association) An organization that set standards for miniature equines that participate in AAI activities. miniatureequinetherapy.org

Resources

Books

Note: The following list is just a sample of books authored by some of the top professionals in the field of AAI. These books will provide in depth information for AAI practitioners. There are references to unique species in each of these books.

Animal Assisted Play Therapy –2017 – Rise VanFleet, Tracie Faa-Thompson

Animal-Assisted Therapy in Counseling 3rd Edition, 2017 – Cynthia K. Chandler

Assessing Handlers for Competence in Animal-Assisted Interventions – 2021 – Ann R. Howie

Career Paths in Human-Animal Interaction for Social and Behavioral Scientists -2021 - Lori Kogan and Phyllis Erdman

Clinician's Guide to Treating Companion Animal Issues – 2018 –Lori Kogan and Christopher Blazina

Equine-Assisted Mental Health for Healing Trauma-2019

Editors: Kay Sudekum Trotter and Jennifer Baggerly

Equine Assisted Mental Health Interventions- 2017

Editors: Kay Sudekum Trotter and Jennifer Baggerly

Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy: Foundations and Guidelines for Animal-Assisted Interventions 5th Edition, 2019

Editor: Aubrey H. Fine

Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice: 3rd Edition, 2010

- Aubrey H. Fine

How Animals Help Students Learn: - 1st edition, 2017: Aubrey Fine, Nancy Gee and Peggy McCardle

Selecting Animals for Education Environments, 1st Edition, 2017

- Maureen MacNamara, Evan MacLean

The Welfare of Animals in Animal-Assisted Interventions – 2021 Dr. Aubrey Fine and Jose M. Peralta

Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy is a therapeutic approach to help support mental health treatments or programs utilizing literature. The following book list is not an endorsement for any particular book. They are listed as an introduction to the type of unique species stories that may be utilized in a variety of therapeutic or educational settings that promote book discussions.

Children's Books

Birds

Harold Finds A Voice – Courtney Dicmas

Mango, Abuela, and Me – Meg Medina

Perky – Christina McKinney

The Pigeon Has feelings, Too! - Mo Willems

Whoever Heard of a Flying Bird? – David Cunliffe

Cats

All Cats Have Asperger Syndrome – Kathy Hoopman

Cat on the Bus – Aram Kim

Goyangi Means Cat – Christine McDonnell

Hate That Cat – Sharon Creech

Meow Means Mischief – Ann Whitehead Nagda

My Cat Copies Me – Yoon duck Kwon

The Upstairs Cat – Jaimi Ilima

Guinea Pigs

Charlie Hits It Big – Deborah Blumenthal

Harry and the Guinea Pig – Nancy Lambert

Super Guinea Pig to the Rescue -Udo Weigel

Pig Enough - Janie Bynum

What Would a Guinea Pig Do? - Kate Duke

Miniature Equines

Itty and Bitty: Two Miniature Horses – Nancy Carpenter Czerw

Itty and Bitty: Friends on the Farm – Nancy Carpenter Czerw

Itty and Bitty: On the Road – Nancy Carpenter Czerw

A Friend For Einstein: The Smallest Stallion – Charlie Cantrel

Come Inside Little Donkey – Shirley Study

The Little Donkey – Shannon L. Mokry

Rabbits

The Forgotten Rabbit – Nancy Furstinger

It's Not Easy Being a Bunny - Marilyn Sadler •

Nobunny's Perfect - Anna Dewdney

The Rabbit Listened – Cori Doerrfeld

While We Were Out – Ho Baek Lee

Young Adult Books – Short Story Collections

Animals and the Kids Who Love Them: Extraordinary True Stories of Hope, Healing, and Compassion

-Linda and Allen Anderson

Chicken Soup for the Pet Lover's Soul: Stories about Pets as Teachers, Healers, Heroes, and Friends

-Jack Canfield

The Gifts We Receive from Animals – Stories to Warm the Heart – Edited by Lori R. Kogan

Websites

Pet Partners – petpartners.org

“Pet Partners is the national leader in demonstrating and promoting the health and wellness benefits of animal-assisted therapy, activities, and education.” They offer a wide variety of free webinars and Facebook Live events on topics related to AAI including information on the nine different species that can be registered with them. They are represented nationally in every

state and internationally in over a dozen countries. Pet Partners also offers certification in Animal Assisted Crisis Response to handlers of all nine species.

Human-Animal Interaction Bulletin (HAIB) – human-animal-interaction.org

“This is an open access, online, peer-reviewed publication devoted to the dissemination of research in the field of the interaction between non-human animals and their human counterparts. The mission of the Human-Animal Interaction Bulletin is to bring together researchers, academicians, clinicians/practitioners, and scholarly students working in different areas for the advancement of the human-animal interaction field.”

The International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO) – iahaio.org

“IAHAIO is the global association of organizations that engage in practice, research and/or education in animal assisted activity, animal assisted therapy, and service animal training. These activities serve to promote pet ownership, the human-animal bond, and respectful approaches to engaging with animals.”

Association of Animal-Assisted Intervention Professionals - aaaiponline.org

“AAAI is a professional home for health care providers, educators, and others to gain the knowledge needed to safely and ethically practice animal-assisted interventions while advancing the field.” This organization was founded in 2022, specifically to serve the needs of AAI professionals.

HABRI -The Human Animal Bond Research Institute – habri.org/

(HABRI) is a non-profit research and education organization that is gathering, funding and sharing scientific research to demonstrate the positive health impacts of companion animals.

ISAZ -The International Society for Anthrozoology (ISAZ) – isaz.net

“It was formed in 1991 as a supportive organization for the scientific and scholarly study of human-animal interactions. ISAZ is a nonprofit, nonpolitical organization with a worldwide, multi-disciplinary membership of students, scholars and interested professionals.”

Behavior Works – behaviorworks.org

“Dr. Susan Friedman is a psychology professor at Utah State University who has pioneered the application of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) to captive and companion animals. ABA, with its roots in human learning, offers a scientifically sound teaching technology and ethical standard that can improve the lives of all learners.”

National Equine Organizations

Note: This list is a representation of some of the national organizations and their requirements for certification.

American Hippotherapy Association (AHA)

“The American Hippotherapy Association, Inc. is a 501(c)3 Non-profit organization, which provides educational resources and continuing education courses for occupational therapy,

physical therapy and speech language pathology professionals who incorporate equines, equine movement and the equine environment in treatment.” (from the website)

Website: americanhippotherapyassociation.org

Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH)

“Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.) a federally registered 501(c3) non-profit, was formed in 1969 as the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association to promote equine-assisted services (EAS) for individuals with special needs.” (from the website)

Website: pathintl.org

National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy (NCEFT)

“NCEFT helps children and adults, including military Veterans and First Responders, with special needs reach beyond their boundaries through equine-assisted therapies, education and research.” (from the website)

Website: nceft.org/

Equine Assisted Growth And Learning Association (EAGALA)

EAGALA stands for the Equine Assisted Growth And Learning Association. It was founded in 1999. Equine Specialists and Mental Health Professionals can get certified in their training model to provide Equine Assisted Psychotherapy.

“The Eagala Model incorporates a licensed Mental Health Professional and a qualified Equine Specialist working together with horses and clients as equal partners in an experiential process that empowers life-changing outcomes.” (from the website)

Website: eagala.org