ASSESSING HANDLERS FOR COMPETENCE

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TOPICS FOR TODAY

• What is competency-based assessment?
• Competencies for your setting
• How to assess competence
• Animal welfare
ASSESSING HANDLERS FOR
COMPETENCE
IN
ANIMAL-ASSISTED
INTERVENTIONS

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WHAT IS COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT?
PRINCIPLES OF COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT*

Current
complies with procedures

Valid
in AAI situations

Reliable
in your facility

Flexible & Fair
allows individual responses

Safe
in decisions and in behavior

*Witty & Gaston, Competency-Based Learning & Assessment, 2008.
KNOWLEDGE

- Does the human know what to do?
- Does the handler have the necessary knowledge to perform a task or group of tasks?
- Does the handler know proper procedures?
SKILL/BEHAVIOR

• How does the human apply their knowledge in real-life situations?
• How well does the handler perform common AAI tasks?
• How well does the handler follow proper facility and AAI procedures?
• Competent does not mean “expert.”
AAI handlers are expected to make sound, independent decisions while providing safe, effective service.

Competency-based assessment looks at how handlers apply their knowledge through behavior.

Interacting safely with humans in AAI requires foundational competence*: interacting with humans while attending to the therapy animal (splitting attention).

Interacting safely with humans in AAI requires *decisional competence*:

making on-the-spot decisions about the safest way to interact with humans in the environment and situation.

*McClarty, Larsen, & Gaertner, Measuring Mastery, 2015.*
Sample Decision Tree

Interacting with Young Children

Ask dog to lie down
- How can I stay close?

Ask dog to stand
- What other adults can assist?
- Does dog tower over children?
COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT OFFERS...

handlers (and animals) who express their individuality while remaining safe.

Rather than...

handlers (and animals) whose individuality is like different colors of the same style t-shirt.
“IF YOU CANNOT GET RID OF THE FAMILY SKELETON, YOU MAY AS WELL MAKE IT DANCE.”

--George Bernard Shaw
WHAT COMPETENCIES DO YOU NEED?

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ADVOCATES FOR THE ANIMAL

PROACTIVE

SAFE

APPROPRIATE

COMMUNICATION WITH ANIMAL

SAMPLE Handler COMPETENCIES*

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OPERATIONALIZING HANDLER COMPETENCIES*

*STEPS of Teamwork © from “Teaming with Your Therapy Dog,” 2015.

- **S**peak to your dog conversationally
- **T**stay in **Touch** with your dog
- **K**eep your **Eyes** on your dog
- **M**aintain close **Proximity** to your dog

**BE FULLY PRESENT**
Principles that guide handlers in ways to support/advocate for their therapy animals.
HOW TO ASSESS COMPETENCE
FIVE-PART PROCESS

1. Identify Competencies
2. Train for Competence
3. Assess Competence
4. Train More (as Needed)
5. Assess Again (as Needed)

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2. TRAIN FOR COMPETENCE

- Foundational competence: splitting attention
- Decisional competence: on-the-spot decision making
- Example competencies:
  - Advocates for animal
  - Proactive
  - Safe
  - Appropriate
  - Communicates with animal appropriately
• Real-life scenario practice
• No one is expected to know everything from the beginning
• Learners give each other feedback about what was done well and what could be improved
• Instructors as well as learners expect to learn
• Create an environment of *psychological safety*
  
  • Competence is *not* “knowing everything”
  
  • Competence is “not knowing” with confidence: being willing to say, “I don’t understand” even when feeling vulnerable
  
  • Feedback is designed to improve the work; it does not mean the individual is personally inadequate*

*Concepts from Young, Valerie, in her podcast for 10 Percent Happier, from her book, "The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women." Currency, 2011."
“I HAVE NOT FAILED. I’VE JUST FOUND 10,000 WAYS THAT WON’T WORK.”

--Thomas Edison
3. ASSESS COMPETENCE

- Real-life scenarios designed to allow the handler to demonstrate competence in decision making and behavior
- In human-oriented facility (not a dog-training facility)
- Give constructive feedback that addresses what was done well as well as what needs refinement
- Handler and animal arrive at facility
- Handler checks in at reception with animal
- Handler and animal wait for staff liaison
- Staff liaison greets team
- They walk together to the interview room/office
- Meeting is interrupted by someone who wants to see and pet the dog

Facility-specific distractions (both appealing and potentially avoidant) are added at natural times

- Random dog
- Loud noise(s)
- Food/offering a treat to the dog
SAMPLE ASSESSMENT FORM PHRASES*

Handler

- Settled and prepared animal partner before greeting staff liaison
- Stayed connected to and supported animal partner throughout interaction with staff liaison
- Clean and odor-free with appropriate attire
- Practiced good mask hygiene
- Followed Gel-Pet-Gel procedure

Scenario:
Meeting Staff Liaison

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*Providence Paw-Assisted Wellness Services
SAMPLE ASSESSMENT FORM PHRASES* (CONT.)

Dog

Appeared: □ Happy □ Confident □ Self-Controlled
- Waited for cue to greet staff liaison
- Appeared to enjoy meeting staff liaison
- Stayed engaged in interactions
- Tolerated / Enjoyed being touched and examined
- Appeared healthy and within normal weight range
- Appeared clean and was odor free
- Responded well to cues from handler

Scenario:
Meeting Staff Liaison
4. **TRAIN FURTHER AS NEEDED**

- Assessment and training are cooperative and constructive processes – both handlers and program leaders learn from each other
- Fine-tune behavior (as needed) before authorizing sessions
- After policies or practices change (i.e., pandemic)
- Essential: environment of psychological safety
5. ASSESS AGAIN AS NEEDED

- More than one assessment before authorizing sessions indicates growth, not failure!
- Essential: environment of psychological safety
- Periodic reassessment for everyone
- Reassess after handler or animal experience a change
- Reassess after procedures change
ANIMAL WELFARE
ANIMAL COMPETENCY HELPS ASSURE ANIMAL WELFARE
Identify Animal Competencies

Examples*:
• Appears to enjoy participating
• Safe
• Appropriate
• Maintains communication with handler

EXAMPLE: OPERATIONALIZING ENJOYMENT*

“GREAT SPIRITS HAVE ALWAYS ENCOUNTERED VIOLENT OPPOSITION FROM MEDIocre MINDS.”

--Albert Einstein
OPPOSITION

- “It’s always been done this way”
- Paradigm shift
- Black-and-white or rigid thinking
- Resistance to change
- Feeling past accomplishments are being threatened
- Success: Intermountain Therapy Animals
REVISITING THE BENEFITS

- Validity for AAI
- Empowers handlers-animal teams to be themselves within a structure of safely
- Trains to expectations
- Emphasizes animal welfare
- “Is it over already?” --Handler
- “It felt real.” --Handler
“THE WAY TO GET STARTED IS TO QUIT TALKING AND BEGIN DOING.”

--Walt Disney
THANK YOU!

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