

ASSESSING HANDLERS FOR COMPETENCE

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UNIVERSITY of
DENVER

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
Institute for Human-Animal Connection

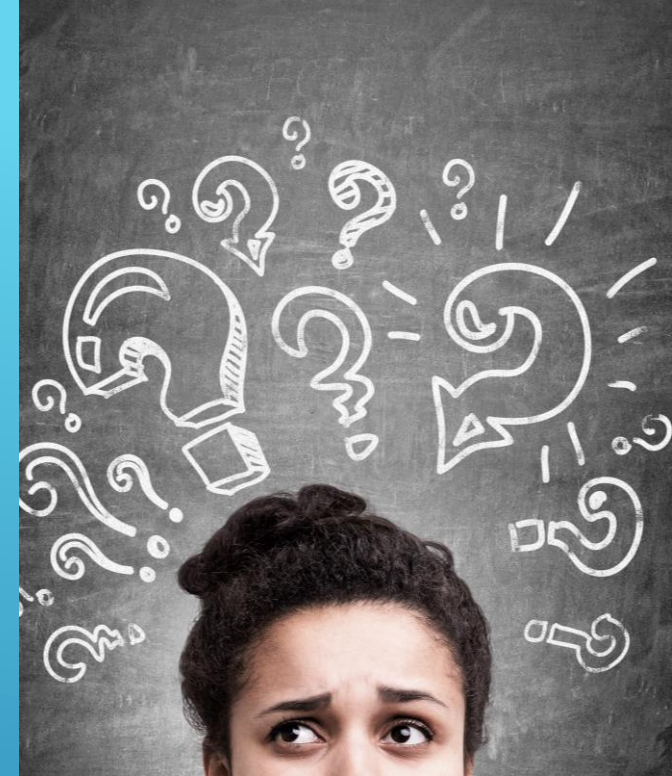


Teaming
WITH YOUR
Therapy Dog



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.

Klein-Collins, *Sharpening Our Focus on Learning*, 2013.





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

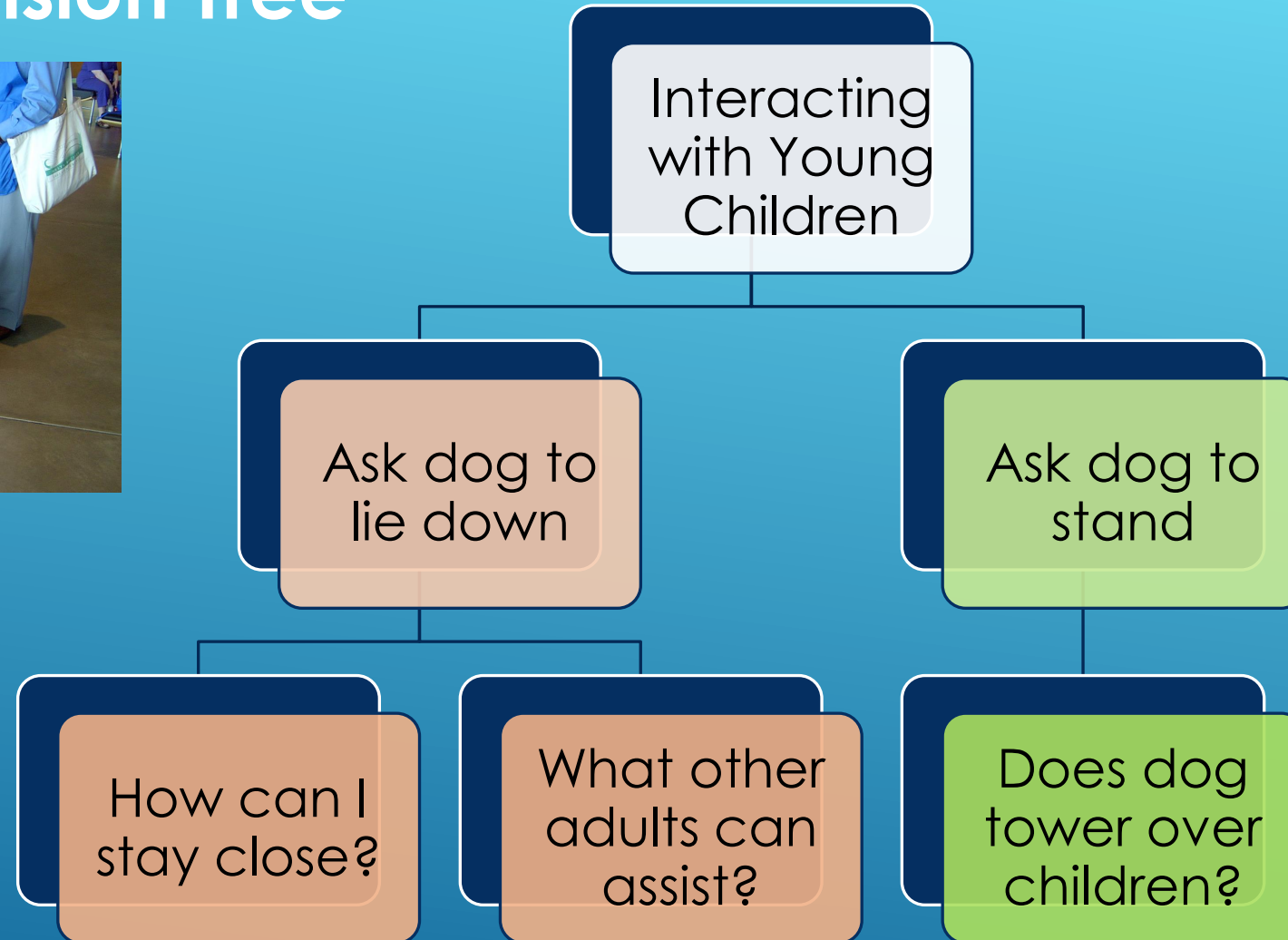
interacting with humans *while attending to the therapy animal (splitting attention).*



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.

Sample Decision Tree





**OPTIONS
JUST AHEAD**

COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT OFFERS...

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

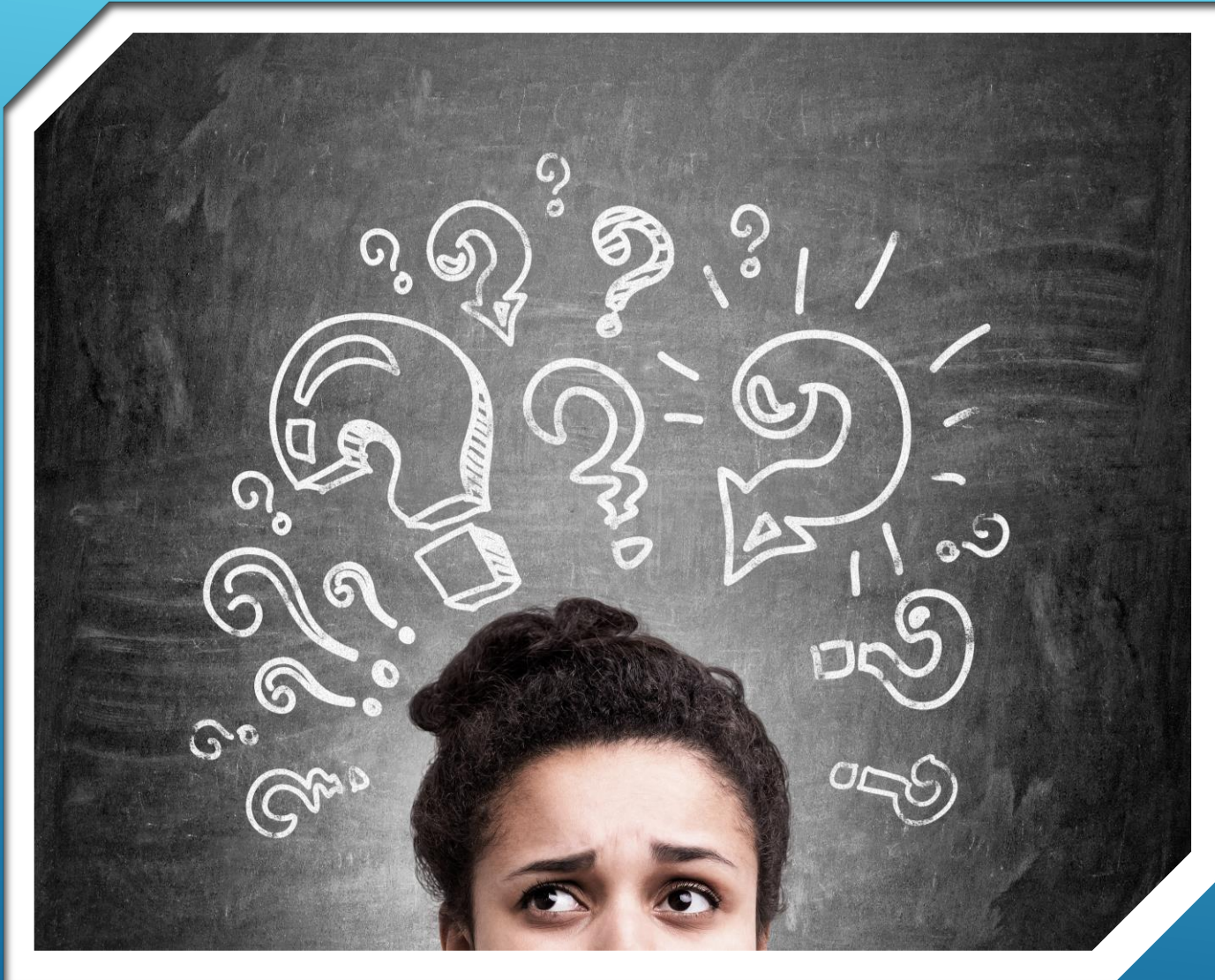
Rather than...

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?



ADVOCATES
FOR THE
ANIMAL



PROACTIVE



SAFE



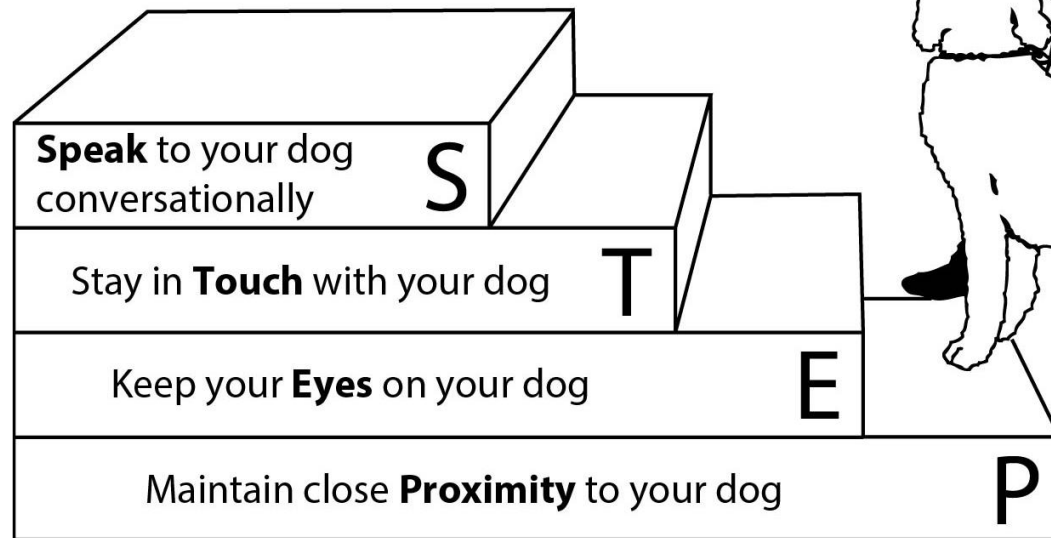
APPROPRIATE



COMMUNI-
CATION
WITH
ANIMAL

SAMPLE HANDLER COMPETENCIES*

OPERATIONALIZING HANDLER COMPETENCIES*



BE FULLY PRESENT

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

Teaming WITH YOUR Therapy Dog



Principles that
guide handlers in
ways to support/
advocate for their
therapy animals

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Foreword by Suzanne Clothier and Kirby Wycoff, PsyD





HOW TO ASSESS COMPETENCE

1

Identify
Compe-
tencies

2

Train for
Compe-
tence

3

Assess
Compe-
tence

4

Train More
(as
Needed)

5

Assess
Again (as
Needed)

FIVE-PART PROCESS

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*

--Thomas Edison

“I HAVE NOT FAILED.
I’VE JUST FOUND 10,000
WAYS THAT WON’T
WORK.”

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

SAMPLE INTERVIEW FORMAT

- ▶ 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

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

ASSESSING HANDLERS FOR **COMPETENCE** — IN — ANIMAL-ASSISTED **INTERVENTIONS**

Contains
training and
assessment
examples
(and more)

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4. TRAIN FURTHER AS NEEDED

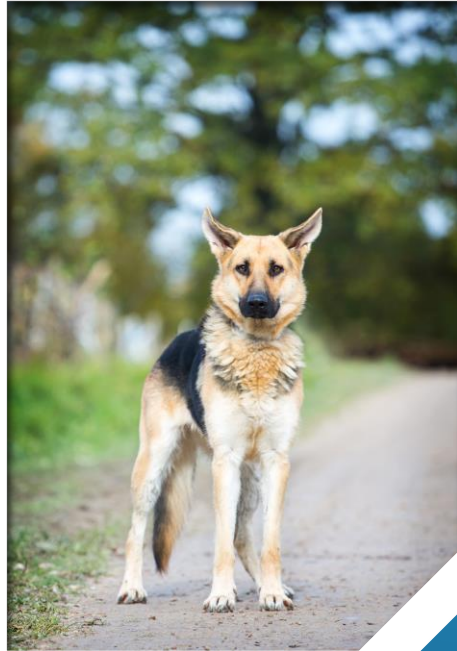
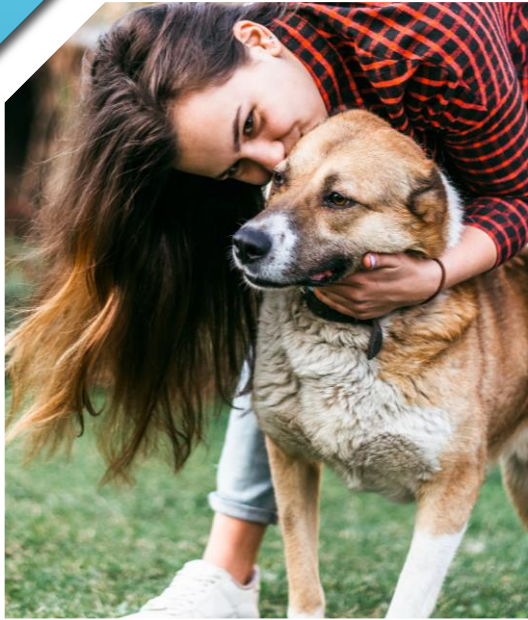
- Assessment and training are cooperative and constructive processes – both handlers and program leaders learn from each other
- Fine-tune behavior (as needed) before authorizing sessions
- After policies or practices change (i.e., pandemic)
- Essential: environment of psychological safety

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*:

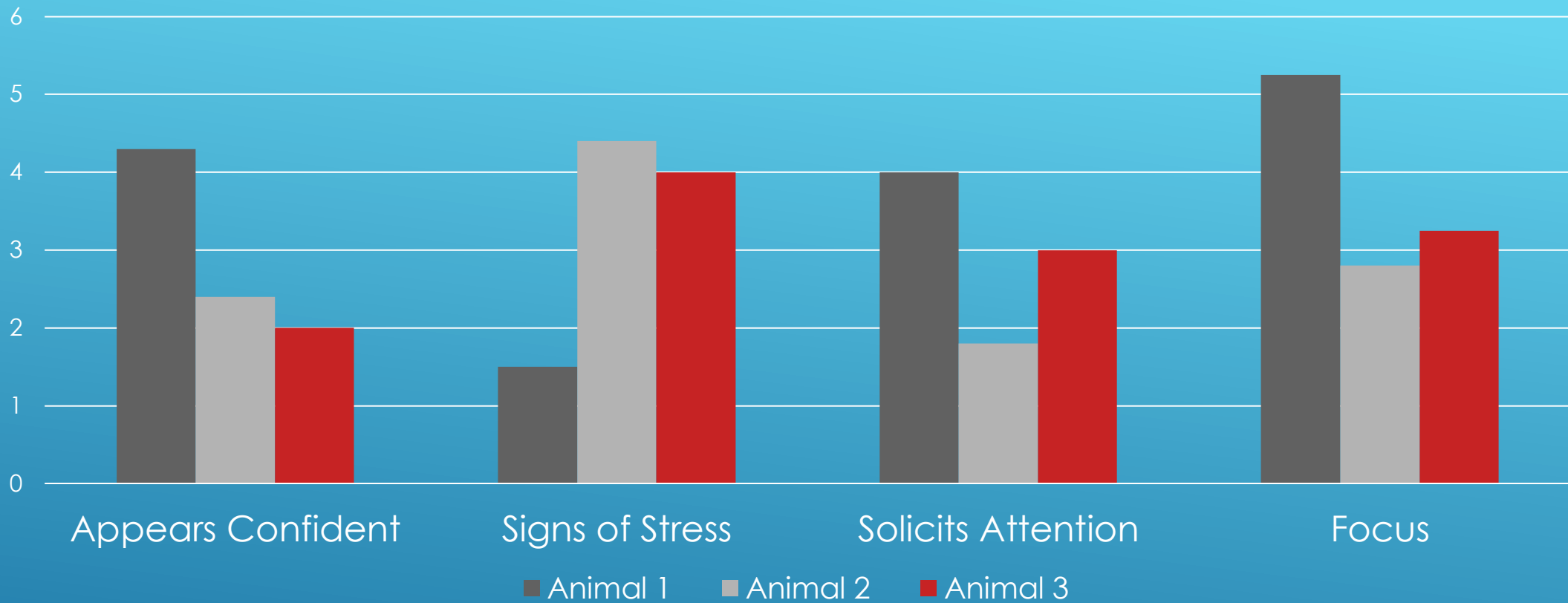
- Appears to enjoy participating
- Safe
- Appropriate
- Maintains communication with handler



*Providence Paw-Assisted Wellness Services, *Guiding Principles*, 2011.

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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 safety**
- **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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