

A fluffy brown and white puppy is looking at a book titled "Animal Assisted Play Therapy". The book cover features several photos of people interacting with animals. The text on the cover includes "Winner of the Dog Writers Association of America 2018 MAXWELL Award in the Human-Animal Bond category" and "VanFleet Far-Thompson".

# Introduction to Animal Assisted Play Therapy®

Harnessing the Healing  
Power of Animals

Dr. Mary Rottier, LPC, RPT-S, CAAPT-S-I,  
CPDT-KA

Pawsitive Counseling Center®

Fremont, Michigan & Statesboro,  
Georgia USA

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# About Me

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- Certified Professional Dog Trainer
- CGC & Therapy Dog Evaluator
- AAPT Instructor and Supervisor
- Registered Play Therapy Supervisor
- Shetland Sheepdog Puppy Breeder for 20 years
- Proud momma of 2 Shetland Sheepdogs (Cali & Fisher), a Quarter Horse (Arrow), 3 Guinea Pigs (Pepsi, Corey, Fig), and a Mini-Lop Bunny (Shiloh).

# What We Will Cover:

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- What is Animal-Assisted Play Therapy®?
- Benefits of Animal-Assisted Play Therapy®
- The Therapeutic Process
- Ethical Considerations
- Conclusions and Q&A





Tip of the  
Iceberg



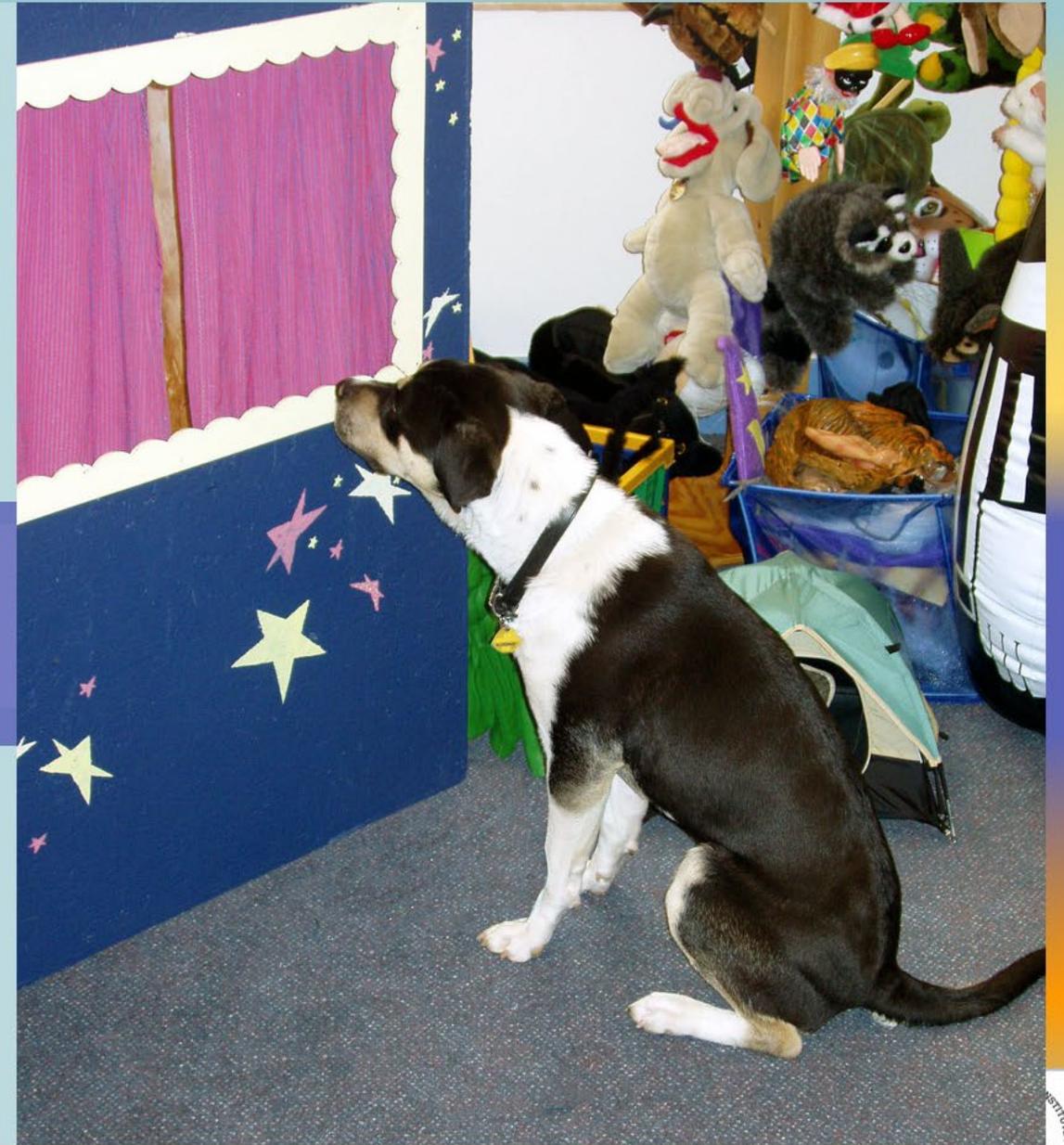


Animal Assisted Play Therapy® is a registered trademark of the Family Enhancement & Play Therapy Center, Inc. (and its International Institute for Animal Assisted Play Therapy®)

Co-created by

Risë VanFleet, PhD, LP, RPT-S, CDBC, CAEBI

Tracie Faa-Thompson, M.A. AASW, PGdipNDPT, CAEBI



Winner of the Dog Writers Association of America  
2018 MAXWELL Award in the Human-Animal Bond category



## Animal Assisted Play Therapy



Risë VanFleet  
Tracie Faa-Thompson

Forewords by Aubrey H. Fine and Patricia McConnell



# Book by AAPT's Co-creators

## Winner of the 2018 Maxwell Award

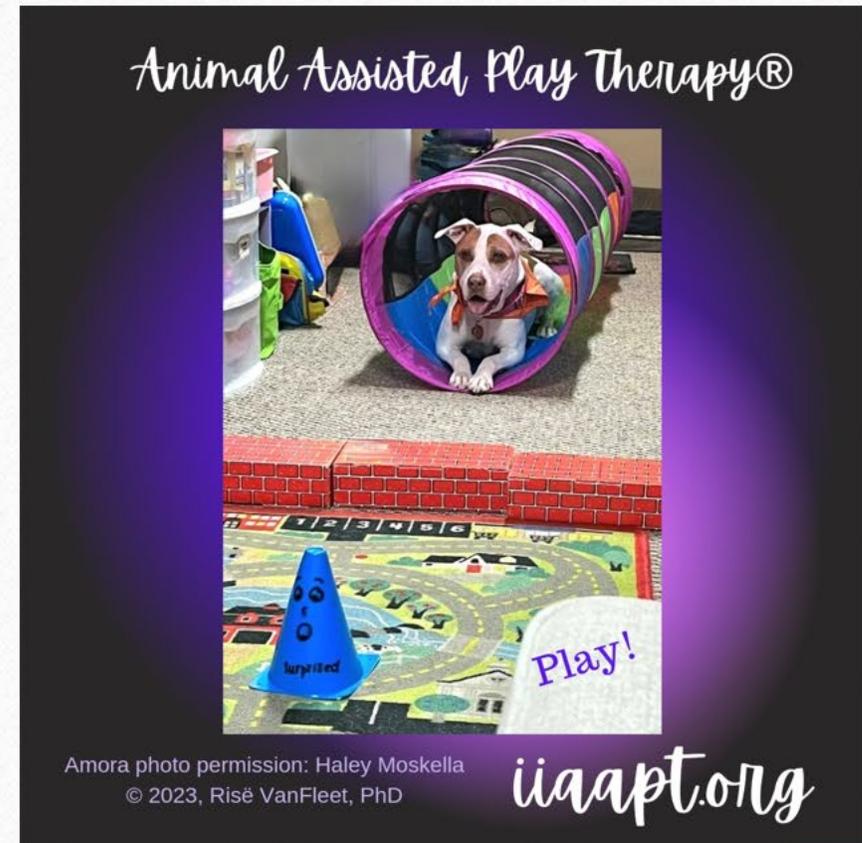


## Best book on the Human-Animal Bond

- VanFleet, R., & Faa-Thompson, T. (2017). *Animal Assisted Play Therapy*. Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press. (450 pp.)
- Includes details about AAPT as a distinct therapeutic modality, including principles, methods, and case studies
- Emphasizes animal welfare, well-being, sentience, and agency, and the full consideration each for animal-assisted interventions and services
- Centered on reciprocal, respectful, and enjoyable relationships between animals and humans

# What Is Animal Assisted Play Therapy®?

- AAPT “is the integrated involvement of animals in the context of play therapy, in which appropriately trained therapists and animals engage with clients primarily through systematic playful interventions, with the goal of improving clients’ developmental and psychosocial health, while simultaneously ensuring the animal’s well-being and voluntary engagement. Play and playfulness are essential ingredients of the interactions and the relationship.” (VanFleet, 2004; VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2017).
- Multidisciplinary approach that fully integrates animal assisted services, play therapy, ethology, animal behavior, and several other fields.
- Applicable for all ages, individuals, families, and groups. Used for a wide range of mental health, allied health, and educational goals. Multiple species can be involved.



# Animal Assisted Play Therapy® Guiding Principles



**ENJOYMENT & CHOICES** - Sessions are enjoyable for animals & clients. Participation is completely voluntary for all. Animals always have an exit route available.

**RELATIONSHIP** - AAPT is always about relationship, not control. Healthy, humane relationships feature reciprocity & mutual benefit.



**PROCESS-ORIENTATION** - Is important for achieving goals. The journey is important & must be flexible, allowing for unexpected events, expression, & creative problem-solving.

**FOUNDATIONS** - AAPT is grounded in well-established theories & empirically supported practices in lifespan development, clinical intervention, play therapy, education, ethics, & welfare.



**RESPECT** - Is equal & reciprocal for clients & animals.

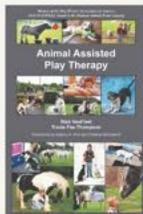
**SAFETY** - Activities are physically & emotionally safe for all involved. The therapist immediately intervenes in unsafe situations.

**ACCEPTANCE** - Is shown to clients & animals for who they are. Empathy for animals & clients guides interventions. Natural animal behavior is valued.



**ANIMAL-FRIENDLY TRAINING** - Only kind, playful, animal-centered, positive, & relationship-based training methods are used to prepare animals. Equipment is minimized, & aversives are never used.

**AGENCY & EMPOWERMENT** - Are maximized for animals & clients. Emphasis is on discovering their competence & confidence and following their unique paths.



[iiaapt.org](http://iiaapt.org)



# AAPT Principles

- Respect
- Safety
- Acceptance
- Enjoyment & Choices
- Relationship
- Animal-Friendly Training
- Agency & Empowerment
- Process Orientation
- Foundations

# AAPT Demonstrated Competencies

- **Therapist-Animal Relationship Competencies**
  - Ethology, Behavior, Development
  - Senses of Species & Individual
  - Reciprocal Relationship Building
  - Fluency in Animal Body Language
  - Animal Responsive Handling & Decision-Making™
  - Animal Friendly Training
  - Proactive and Split Attention
  - Natural Environment & Awareness
- **Animal-Related Competencies**
  - Selection of Animals
  - Animal Appropriateness Scale™ (personality & preferences)
  - Animal's Trained Behaviors
  - Therapy Involvement Plan™ for Each Animal
- **Therapy/Education Competencies**
  - Professional Therapist or Educator Competence
  - Play Therapy Competence
  - Planning, Conducting, Facilitating, & Processing AAPT Sessions
- **Ethics & Welfare Competencies**
  - Adherence to All Professional Ethical Standards
  - Effectiveness of Intervention (evidence of goal attainment)
  - Fidelity to AAPT Values & Principles (re. clients AND animals)
  - Adherence to Highest Welfare & Well-Being Standards
  - Voluntary Participation of All



# Benefits of Animal- Assisted Play Therapy®

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Emotional and psychological benefits

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Enhanced communication and trust

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Reduced anxiety and stress

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Improves rapport and child's ability to engage in a play session

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Improves social skills and confidence levels of children while also decreasing their aggressive and maladaptive behaviors

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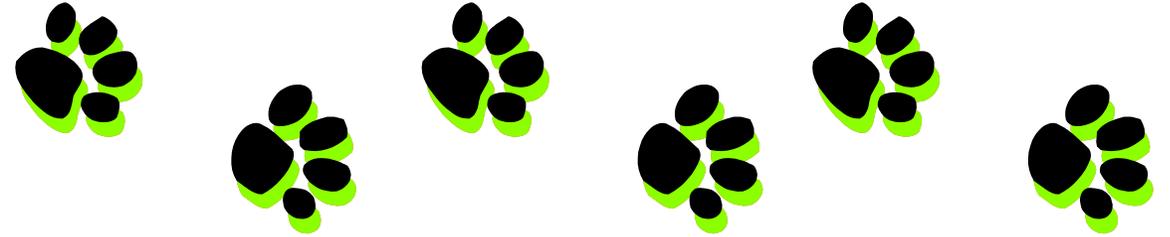
Enhances a child's self esteem and promotes emotional expression

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Can provide an opportunity to help children overcome a fear of animals

# Other Benefits of AAPT

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- Offers nurturance through a presentation of unconditional acceptance and interaction
- Improves cooperation and problem solving ability
- Helps children learn to set and respect the boundaries of others
- Decreases anxiety and helps children better organize their behavior
- Promotes healthy attachment relationships
- Aids in processing traumatic experiences

# Primary Goals of AAPT

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1. Development of self-efficacy
2. Healthy attachment and relationship
3. Empathy
4. Self-regulation
5. Problem-resolution for a wide range of specific difficulties:  
anxiety, ADHD, autism, chronic medical illness, delinquency  
and truancy, attachment problems, family tensions, depression,  
selective mutism, ODD, grief, and trauma

(VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2010, 2017; VanFleet, 2008; VanFleet & Coltea, 2012; VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2017)

# Basic Principles



Activities should be enjoyable for both animal partner and child

Mutual respect exists for all participants

Unconditional positive regard for animal partner and child is critical

Must have sound skills in play therapy before an animal can be introduced

All animal-therapist teams must have undergone positive handler training and have an understanding of the communication for the species they are partnering with.

# Training for the Play Therapy Partner

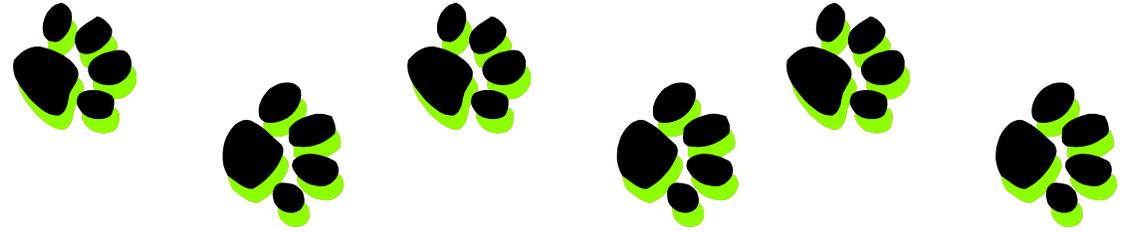
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- Puppy Socialization
- Exposure to toys
- Desensitizing to sounds
- Meeting New People



# Training a Play Companion

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- Training should revolve around positive reinforcement, praise, fun, and showing the dog how to be successful.
- We do not believe in forceful negative corrections that overwhelm and confuse the animal.
- Therapy is not based on punitive or aversive measures and neither should the training of the therapy animal.
- Good training does not just happen; it is the product of enthusiastic instructors possessing a broad base of experience with a specific species.

# Training the Play Companion

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- Use gentle, positive reinforcement to teach the animal basic cues. For example, a dog who loves praise and treats will respond well to more specific therapy dog training when he is older. All play therapy dogs must be housebroken, have good manners and basic training skills. It also helps if the dog can learn to respond to these cues from a third party as well.
- Teach your dog it's OK for strangers to approach you and talk with you.
- Socialize your dog. Take her to the park, walk her on a leash in your neighborhood and carefully introduce her to young children.



# What Happens in an AAPT Session

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- Children can help in training the animal in basic agility, trick, and obedience skills
- We can use Interventions such as animal images, stories, and metaphors to parallel and aid in understanding the child's experiences
- Children can help in grooming and caring for the animal, learning appropriate touch and cues from the animal.
- Children can communicate their experiences and feelings to the animal by sharing stories creating sandtrays, or drawing pictures for, with or about the animal.
- A dog can be part of the child's play session playing roles given by the child.
- Obstacle courses, hide and seek as well as a variety of other activities can occur in a session.

# Ethical Considerations

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- Must have informed consent and screening procedures in place
- Safeguards for the therapist
  - Ensuring proper training in the modality for therapist
  - Malpractice insurance considerations
- Protection of the therapeutic relationship
  - Child has a choice to have the animal as part of the session
  - Discuss limits and expectations ahead of time (Animal Dictionary)
- Protection of the therapy animal
  - Animal has a choice to be part of the session (no leashes/lead ropes, quiet space to retreat)
  - Monitor for signs of stress and respond immediately
  - Shelves may need to be altered to protect the therapy animal
  - Do not overwork your therapy animal – Your animal should not be worked past the time he begins showing signs of fatigue – for dogs no more than 2 hours of worktime per day three or fewer days per week.

The International Institute for Animal Assisted Play Therapy® offers high quality extensive training in AAPT as well as a certification program. This rigorous professional certification program is based on demonstrated competencies acquired through considerable training, relationship work with one's animals, and supervised experience.

For more information:  
[www.iaapt.org](http://www.iaapt.org)

## 2025 Animal Assisted Play Therapy® Level 1 Workshops



Apr 29-May 2: Dr Risë VanFleet  
Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania  
[info@iaapt.org](mailto:info@iaapt.org)

Apr 30-May 3: Jeri Yingling.Teri Holamon  
Woodland Park, Colorado  
[jeri@crystalcreekcounseling.com](mailto:jeri@crystalcreekcounseling.com)

May 6-9: Dr Mary Rottier  
Fremont, Michigan  
[pawsitivecc@gmail.com](mailto:pawsitivecc@gmail.com)

June 19-22: Teri Holamon  
Rockwall, Texas  
[info@teriholamon.com](mailto:info@teriholamon.com)

July 27-30: Tracie Faa-Thompson.Sheli Brown  
Lowick, Northumberland, UK  
[aaptbaseuk@mail.com](mailto:aaptbaseuk@mail.com)

[iaapt.org](http://iaapt.org)

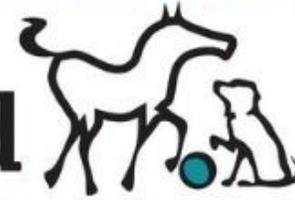
EMPATHY, EMPOWERMENT, ENTHUSIASM  
for humans & animals in reciprocal relationships





INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR

**Animal  
Assisted  
Play Therapy®**



**The International Association for AAPT**

**<https://iaaapt.org>**

Benefits include discounts on virtual and live presentations and conferences, a professional magazine, special events, and much more!



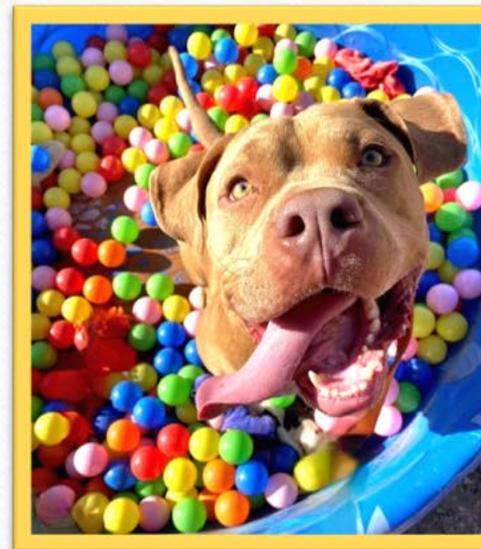
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# Information – [iiaapt.org](https://iiaapt.org)

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# PAWSITIVE

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Questions???

