

Expanding our Toolkit

A Book Review by Jennifer Ericson

Alternatives to Traditional Animal Assisted Interventions: Expanding Our Toolkit

is a collection of 55 animal-assisted activities to help clients via virtual meetings. Written by mental and occupational health professionals from Human-Animal Interaction Section and Animal Assisted Intervention International, not possible. Although this resource was not written for pet therapy teams, it does include some great tips and activities that KPETS volunteer teams can use, making it worth a read.



The first activity, “Canine Online Training”, may be the most useful as it details how to train your dog to look at the computer camera and to get comfortable responding to humans seen and heard on the monitor. As when learning all new skills, mastering this one can take time and should be done in short incremental steps. However, once a dog masters looking at and interacting with people on the screen, more innovative, virtual pet therapy visits become possible.

It should be noted that most, if not all, activities in this E-book require that an adult or caregiver assist the client being “visited.” Many activities also require certain materials be provided and setup on the client’s end before the virtual visit begins. Of course, almost all activities also require that the dog or therapy animal has mastered a specific skill for that activity, such as ending each session by putting their nose to the camera as a doggy goodbye.

There are at least two activities, though, where training a dog to learn a new trick is the activity. For example, during “Dogs & Children Distance Learning Together”, the handler teaches their dog a simple trick while schoolchildren watch. During this activity, the handler prompts children to share how they learn new things in school. The goal is to help children recognize the similar ways humans and dogs learn new things— breaking things down into smaller steps, repeating them, and playing educational games to make learning fun.

The book includes many clever activities KPETS teams could use with children or memory-impaired adults, such as the “Counting Game”, “Dog Bingo”, “Egg-citing Colors”, and “Scavenger Hunt”. In each of these, the dog needs to be able to pick up objects, such as numbered balls, toilet paper rolls with words on them, or plastic eggs with treats and messages inside, and give them to the handler. Clients then either practice age-appropriate math problems, fill their pre-distributed bingo cards, identify egg colors and complete specific tasks, or find a particular object in their home.

Another fun activity suggested for kids that can be done during or after a visit is coloring in a photo of the therapy pet. Apple’s free Colorscape app lets you turn a photo of your pet into a printable coloring page that can be converted to PDF and emailed to clients.

“The Shell Game” might be the easiest activity to entertain people of all ages and abilities. During this activity, handlers hide a dog treat under one of three cups while the client and dog watch. The handler then shuffles the cups a few times and asks the client to guess which cup is hiding the treat. After they guess, the handler has the dog sniff out and reveal the treat’s actual location.

While most of the activities in this book should only be conducted by licensed mental or occupational health professional, there are many activities that KPETS volunteers can do to enhance their virtual visit offerings. Whether you are a new or experienced pet therapy team, there are some fresh ideas worth reading in this free, online resource.