The Effect of Ludo the Therapy Dog at Indooroopilly State High School

Animal Assisted Therapy has become increasingly popular in recent times. Animal Assisted Therapy will be defined as "the inclusion of an animal in a treatment plan where the introduction of the animal is designed to accomplish predefined outcomes best addressed through exposure to an animal" (Nimer & Lundhal, 2007). Evidence suggests that Animal Assisted Therapy has a positive influence on counselling relationships through helping build rapport and facilitating feelings of safety (Chandler et al., 2010). Theoretically use of Animal Assisted Therapy is rooted in attachment theory. An aspect of attachment theory is having a secure space to which an individual may return when exploring the external world (Bowlby, 1988). In this context, the therapy dog serves as a 'security-enhancing attachment figure', allowing the client to safely explore difficult thoughts and feelings (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). This is especially helpful for children as they perceive the therapy dog as a non-judgemental companion (Friesen, 2009). Although there is somewhat limited research into the effectiveness of animals in a therapy context there are some measures of effectiveness for the therapy dogs. For example, measuring emotional and academic support have relied on measures of self-report data on students themselves as learners, report from others as to relationships with peers, attendance scores etc (Lloyd & Sorin, 2014).

Method

In line with previous research into the effectiveness of Animal Assisted Therapy, we developed a short survey for both the student and a teacher observing the interaction (see appendix A). The survey was developed considering any potential difficulties children with mental difficulties might encounter. The student survey was rated on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from *1 (Angry),* to *7 (Calm).* The desired outcome was calm as this most conductive to focus. To supplement the student survey, we included the observer survey to

provide additional information from an outside perspective. The surveys were completed shortly after the interaction with Ludo as the students were often not in the right frame of mind to complete a pre interaction questionnaire. To consolidate the data, we determined the average time taken for Ludo to have an effect, the emotions experienced pre and post interaction, as well as common themes observed during the interaction. We included the option of additional notes to capture anything not included in the survey and allow observers to highlight their perspective on the situation.

Results

Student Report

Most student experience neutral feelings before the interaction and experienced feeling 'calm' and 'very happy' after. Students feeling angry before the interaction felt 'calm' after the interaction. Even those who felt 'calm' prior, experienced positive effects from the interaction often reporting feeling 'very happy' after the interaction.

Observer Report

The average time for Ludo to have an effect was 5.5 minutes with a maximum time of 15 minutes and a minimum of less than 1 minute. Students were separated into three categories for the purpose of analysis, based on experience prior to interaction. These categories included 1) anxious, slow and unexcited, 2) distracted, and 3) balanced/ no negative emotion. Those in category 1 felt anxious, clingy, drained, and were often crying. The first category yielded feelings of 'calm', 'happiness' and more energy after the interaction. The average time for Ludo to have an effect was 5 minutes.

Those in category 2 felt distracted, wandering minds, and were fidgety. This category yielded feelings of 'calm', 'focus' and specifically one student experienced a reduction in

their motor and verbal tics. In this instance Ludo was utilised as a reward for staying focused on a task. The average time taken to see effects were less than five minutes.

Those in category 3 felt 'calm' or 'neutral' before their interaction with Ludo. Interactions often included patting and observing Ludo. These interactions yielded an effect of happiness and feelings of excitement in the students. The average time for the interaction to have an effect was observed to be immediate.
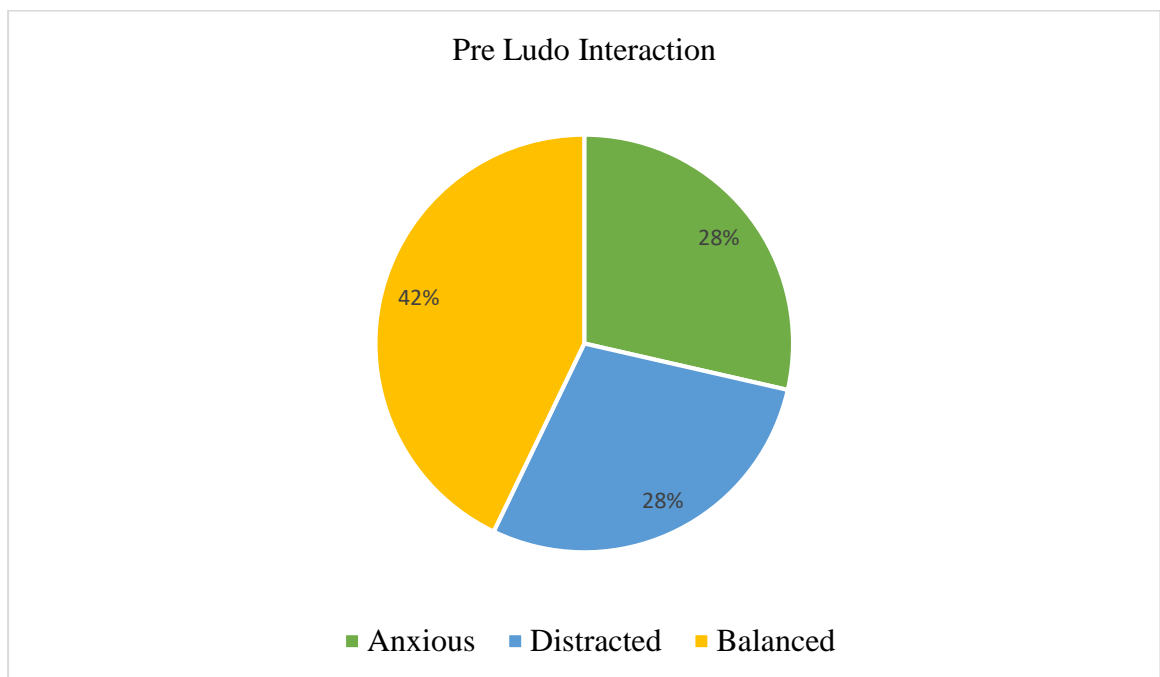
Figure. Emotions of student prior to interaction with Ludo (%)
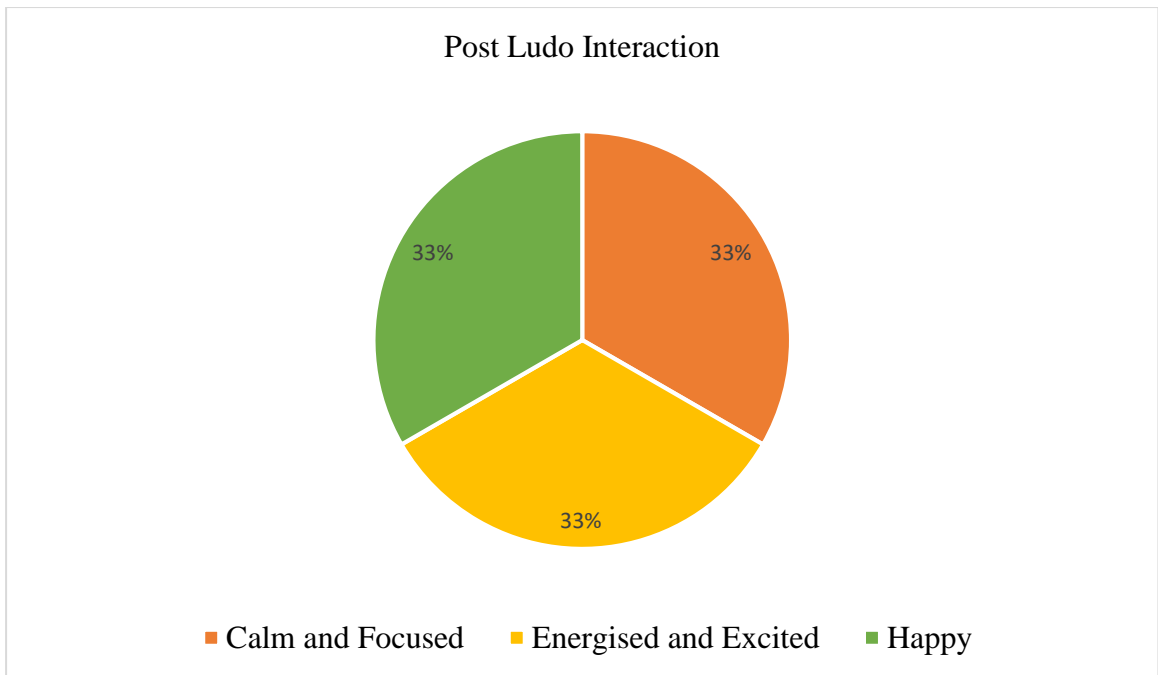
Figure. Emotions of student post interaction with Ludo (%)

Conclusion

To investigate whether Ludo has a positive impact on the students and environment at Indooroopilly State High School a survey was conducted. The survey found that Ludo had a positive effect on student emotions when student was experiencing anxiety or feeling distracted. Even students' feelings balanced were able to reap the positive effects of interacting with Ludo. This was supported by both student self-report and description of interactions by observers. The results suggest that Ludo is an asset to the school due to the positive effects that occur that is generalisable to wide range of emotions. This supports previous literature which has suggested the positive effect of therapy dogs in a school environment. However, further research is needed to determine how interactions can be optimised.

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Appendix A

Observer Survey

Observer Name: Student Name: Date:

Describe briefly the interactions between the student and Ludo

How long did the interaction take until desired effect was achieved?

How would you describe the behaviours of the student before, compared to after, interacting with Ludo? You might like to include positive (such as smiling, positive physical contact etc) and negative behaviours (physical or verbal aggression, grabbing, frowning etc) present
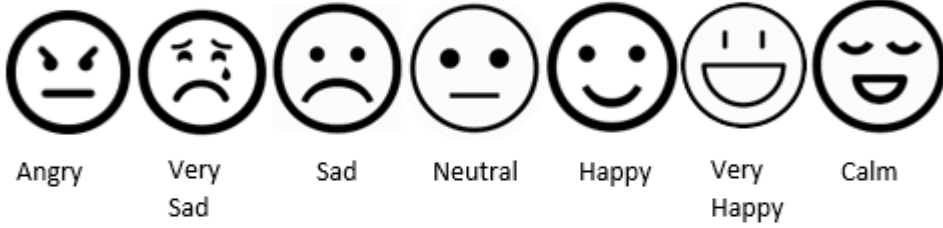
Before:

After:

Additional Comments

Student Survey

Student name: Date:

How did you feel before spending time with Ludo today?

| Angry | Very Sad | Sad | Neutral | Happy | Very Happy | Calm |

How did you feel after spending time with Ludo today?

| Angry | Very Sad | Sad | Neutral | Happy | Very Happy | Calm |