

# Animal-Assisted Interventions Competencies

Based on the findings of a Qualitative Investigation of the Knowledge,  
Skills, and Attitudes Required of Competent Animal-Assisted Therapy

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## Overview

Animal-assisted interventions (AAI) is an interdisciplinary term to describe interventions that integrate various species of animals into the care and well-being of human beings. AAI encompasses both Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA), which is defined as opportunities for motivational, educational and/or recreational benefits enhancing quality of life delivered by a specially trained professional, paraprofessional and/or volunteer in partnership with an animal that meets specific criteria for suitability and Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT), which is defined as goal-directed intervention, delivered by an appropriately credentialed health or human service professional in which an animal is incorporated as an integral part of the clinical healthcare treatment process (Pet Partners, 2016). The application and delivery of AAI services vary greatly depending on the professional identity of the service provider involved, service setting, and goal of services.

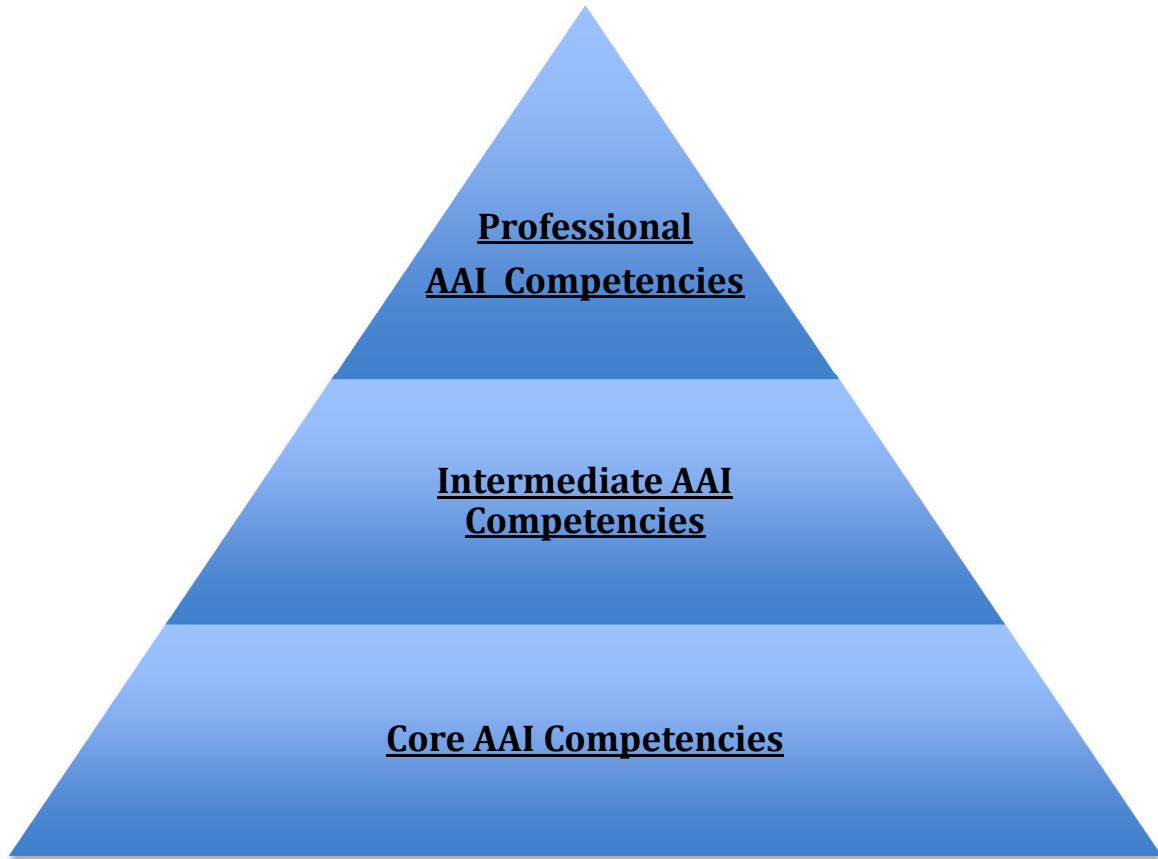
When implemented with the appropriate education and training, AAI has the potential to impact the therapeutic experience of a diverse range of individuals across a wide variety of settings in a highly positive manner (Chandler, 2005, 2012; Fine, 2004). AAI is growing in use and popularity, and the empirical support for its efficacy is steadily increasing (Stewart, Chang, & Jaynes, 2013). The intervention's broad and flexible applicability and positive impact on the therapeutic process make it an attractive and valuable option for many volunteers, paraprofessionals, and licensed professional healthcare or human service providers. If volunteers and professional providers are to deliver this intervention ethically and effectively, specialized knowledge and training are necessary.

## Background and Current Issues

To address the need for specialized knowledge and skills in AAI, the primary author recruited experts in the area of AAI (N=20) to participate in a Grounded Theory investigation of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of competent AAI providers. The participants of this study represented a wide variety of professional identities, practice settings, client populations, and choice of therapy animal species. However, despite this wide variability, the research team reached saturation quite early in the data collection process, which remained consistent throughout the remaining responses. This early and consistent saturation may reveal a unified consensus of expert practitioners of AAI that spans across professional identities, treatment settings, and choice of therapy animal partners. All participants were invited to review and provide feedback on the themes and subthemes identified by the research team. Based on the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data, the research team constructed a theoretical framework which represents competencies in AAI.

Using this theoretical framework, the author proposed a total of nine essential competency areas for utilizing AAI. These areas are divided into three domains in accordance with the competency framework that includes Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (Myers & Sweeny, 1990). This document is intended to address the clear call for such standards of competence by many researchers and experienced practitioners of AAI.

Figure 1  
Tiered Model of Animal-Assisted Interventions Competencies



### **Definitions**

**Core AAI Competencies:** Knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of animal-handler teams operating all levels and in all capacities (volunteer, paraprofessional, and professional).

**Intermediate AAI Competencies:** Knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of animal-handler teams providing animal-assisted interventions in paraprofessional and professional capacities.

**Professional AAI Competencies:** Discipline-specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of animal-handler teams in a professional capacity as an appropriately licensed or credentialed professional.

## Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI) Core Competencies

This set of competencies is comprised of the base-level knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of competent animal-handler teams operating all levels and in all capacities (volunteer, paraprofessional, and professional).

### Knowledge

- 1) Competent handlers/providers of AAI possess in-depth knowledge about the therapy animal on an individual, breed, and species level.
  - a) Extensive, species-specific ethological knowledge about the therapy animal(s)
    - i) Physiology, behavior & history
    - ii) Care & husbandry
    - iii) Understanding that knowledge about one particular species is not necessarily generalizable to other species
  - b) Knowledge of animal training techniques
    - i) Positive, non-coercive training methods
    - ii) Ability to train animal(s) for a variety of environments and situations
    - iii) Ability to facilitate animal's socialization, desensitization and comfort
  - c) Establish & maintain a strong working relationship with the therapy animal(s)
    - i) Ability to work effectively as a team with therapy animal
    - ii) Knowledge of triggers to stress
    - iii) Ability to educate others about the animal's triggers
    - iv) Ability to recognize and apply effective calming interventions to a stressed therapy animal
  - d) Understanding the social and cultural factors relevant to AAI and multicultural implications of human-animal interactions
    - i) Respecting the attitudes of others, particularly those concerned with the animal's presence
    - ii) Understanding that human-animal interaction may hold different meanings across a variety of cultures
  - e) Ability to maximize the potential for safe interactions between clients and animals
    - i) Infection prevention/control and consideration of other zoonotic agents
    - ii) Considerations for allergies, phobias, past history of animal abuse, and past history of animal-related trauma

### Skills

- 2) Ability to prevent and respond to animal stress, fatigue, and burnout
  - a) Actively prevent animal burnout and fatigue
  - b) Proactively plan stress-relief and stress-prevention strategies for the animal(s)
  - c) Ability to immediately address unexpected animal stress
  - d) Ability to identify and respond to animal's signals and body language, especially when the animal does not want to interact
  - e) Ability to provide for the animal's needs, both at the site and in general
    - i) Access to water, a quiet rest/retreat area, and regular bathroom breaks
    - ii) Attend to animal's overall wellness through appropriate provision of quality nutrition, exercise, grooming and veterinary care

- 3) Ability to objectively assess an animal's suitability, strengths, and limitations despite the handler/provider's potential emotional bond with or personal bias towards the animal
  - a) Ability to identify and address personal biases towards the therapy animal(s)
  - b) Ability to objectively assess an animal's suitability for AAI, situationally and in general
  - c) Ability to objectively assess an animal's suitability for each AAI session on an individual basis

#### Attitudes

- 4) Competent providers of AAI prioritize their responsibility to animals involved in AAI and are effective animal advocates.
  - a) Understanding that the animal(s) involved is (are) the handler's/provider's responsibility
    - i) Understanding that animal welfare/advocacy directly impacts client safety
    - ii) Understanding that animal advocacy is essential to the ethical practice of AAI
  - b) Respecting animal rights, animal welfare, and recognition that animals have a right to choose their level of participation
    - i) Awareness of the potential for animal exploitation, either accidentally or intentionally
  - c) Promoting awareness of AAI awareness at micro and macro levels (individual, community, public)
    - i) Awareness that AAI handlers/providers are ambassadors for the field
      - (1) Maintaining appropriate professional behavior when representing AAI
      - (2) Willingness to speak to and educate individuals, groups, and organizations/institutions about AAI
    - ii) Supporting learning opportunities for AAI enthusiasts, students and trainees
      - (1) Supporting and advocating for the development of AAI specialty credentials
- 5) Competent handlers/providers of AAI strive towards AAI specific professional values
  - a) Enthusiasm and passion for AAI
  - b) Demonstrating flexibility, openness, and creativity
  - c) Demonstrating a calm demeanor during unexpected events/situations
  - d) Demonstrating empathy for humans and animals
  - e) Willing to embrace the experiential nature of AAI by being cognitively present and responsive to ever-changing situational factors

## Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI) Intermediate Competencies

This set of competencies is comprised of intermediate-level knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of competent animal-handler teams providing Animal-Assisted Interventions in paraprofessional and professional capacities. Competent paraprofessional and professional providers of AAI demonstrate the core competencies as described above in addition to the intermediate-level competencies.

### Knowledge

- 6) Competent paraprofessionals/providers of AAI acquire AAI specific training, assessment, and supervision.
  - a) Successful completion of formal, discipline-specific coursework
    - i) Knowledge of how animals are utilized in therapeutic settings
    - ii) Evaluation of AAI knowledge
      - (1) AAI Professional Identity
      - (2) History of AAI in general and in the paraprofessional/provider's specific discipline
      - (3) Literature and evidence-based practice of AAI
  - b) Understanding the impact of the human-animal bond
    - i) Understanding the physiological & neurological impact of human-animal interaction
    - ii) Understanding that human-animal interaction can illicit unexpected vulnerability and disclosure in others
    - iii) Knowledge of how the human-animal bond can impact the treatment process
      - (1) Advantages
      - (2) Limitations
      - (3) Indications & contraindications
  - c) Effective risk management strategies and skills
    - (1) Knowledge of liability issues related to AAI
    - (2) Knowledge of legal issues associated with AAI such as HIPPA, FERPA, and state/local laws regarding confidential and privileged information
    - (3) Inclusion of appropriate documentation procedures
    - (4) Confirm personal and professional insurance coverage for AAI

### Skills

- 7) Competent providers of AAI demonstrate intentional incorporation of AAI into the patient/client relationship, plan, and process
  - a) Knowledge that AAI is a skillful intervention
    - i) More than owning/loving animals
    - ii) More than simply including an animal in the treatment setting
  - b) Skillful selections and assessment of AAI strategies
    - i) Select appropriate interventions and strategies for each patient/client, in each session, based on treatment goals
    - ii) Ability to assess the outcome of AAI
    - iii) Awareness of transference/countertransference considerations related to AAI



- 8) Competent paraprofessionals/providers of AAI recognize that AAI is a specialty area with a learned and practiced skill set. Competent AAI providers demonstrate specialized skills and abilities that are appropriate to the specialty area of AAI
  - a) Understanding the experiential nature of AAI
  - b) Ability to attend to/care for the patient(s)/client(s) and therapy animal(s) simultaneously
    - i) Demonstrates effective judgment when assessing the session's impact on the therapy animal(s)
    - ii) Demonstrates effective judgment when assessing the session's impact on the patient(s)/client(s)
    - iii) Demonstrates effective judgment when assessing the session's impact on volunteers/assistants/paraprofessionals (if applicable)

## Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI) Professional Competencies

This set of competencies is comprised of advanced-level knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of competent animal-handler teams providing Animal-Assisted Therapy and in a professional capacity as an appropriately licensed or credentialed healthcare or human services professional. Competent licensed/credentialed professional providers of AAI demonstrate the base-level and intermediate-level competencies as listed above, in addition to advanced-level competencies.

### Knowledge

- 9) Knowledge of AAI specific techniques & principles appropriate to the provider's professional discipline
  - a) Implications for specific patient/client populations
  - b) Implications for specific presenting concerns
- 10) Participation in supervised professional practice
  - a) Gaining applied experience under the supervision of an appropriately qualified professional to supplement didactic knowledge
  - b) AAI is successfully integrated into provider's personal model/philosophy of practice
  - c) Feedback and assessment of AAI skills through peer supervision or professional supervision
- 11) Competent providers of AAI demonstrate integrated ethics. Thus, competent providers of AAI are aware of AAI specific ethical considerations and are able to incorporate ethical professional practice with ethical AAI practice.
  - a) Able to recognize and discuss the ethical implications of AAI
    - i) Inform patients/clients of purpose of AAI
    - ii) Discuss and address potential safety issues
    - iii) Maintain respect for the animal(s), the patient(s)/client(s), and the treatment process
    - iv) Awareness of the provider's personal biases, including the impact of the provider's emotional bond with the animal and its impact on the treatment process

## Skills

- 12) Competent providers of AAI demonstrate a mastery of discipline-specific professional skills prior to integrating AAI interventions. AAI is practiced only within the boundaries of a provider's professional scope of practice.
- a) Awareness that AAI is not recommended for beginning-level practitioners
    - i) Gaining knowledge and experience with basic discipline-specific skills before integrating AAI
    - ii) Possessing familiarity and competence with patient/client population and presenting concerns before integrating AAI
  - b) Demonstrating professional effectiveness without the integration of a therapy animal
    - i) Recognizing that AAI is utilized to enhance the treatment process rather than as a stand-alone intervention
  - c) Knowledge and integration of theory-based interventions
    - i) Ability to articulate the role of AAI within a provider's personal model/philosophy of treatment
    - ii) Understanding the goals of AAI interventions
    - iii) Awareness of the validity of the AAI interventions being used
  - d) Ability to assess, interpret, and utilize the animal's responses in a therapeutically meaningful way
    - i) Ability to link animal/client interactions to patient/client behaviors/goals/conceptualization
    - ii) Ability to link unexpected events or interactions to patient/client goals or presenting concerns
    - iii) Ability to model appropriate, respectful, and empathetic animal care

## Attitudes

- 13) Competent providers of AAI have a well-developed professional identity and are professional advocates for AAI
- a) Active involvement in continuing education and engagement in professional development
    - i) Regular consultation and collaboration with other AAI providers
    - ii) Regular consultation and collaboration and consultation with professional animal specialists
  - b) Maintaining familiarity with existing and emerging AAI literature (discipline-specific)
    - i) Familiarity with current AAI language/terminology
    - ii) Encouraging and supporting the continued development of AAI literature

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