

**APPLICATION OF ANIMAL ASSISTANCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN  
FACULTY OF EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

**Author:**

Antal Lovas Kiss (Ph.D., hab.)  
University of Debrecen (Hungary)

**Reviewers:**

Norbert Tóth  
University of Debrecen (Hungary)

Ferenc Mező (Ph.D.)  
Eszterhazy Károly Catholic University, Eger  
(Hungary)

E-mail address of the author:

[lovaskiss@ped.unideb.hu](mailto:lovaskiss@ped.unideb.hu)

...and two other anonymous reviewers

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**Abstract**

Animal assistance used among university students is not unknown, numerous foreign examples prove its valid existence. The application aimed at university students appeared in the United States of America, but nowadays it is used in many countries around the world. The emergence of assistance dogs in higher education is related to the scientific interest aimed at discovering and measuring the causes of the positive effects experienced during the use of assistance animals. Simultaneously with the introduction of animal assistance training at the University of Debrecen Faculty of Education for Children and Special Educational Needs, the university student sensitization program began in 2021, within the framework of which students can meet the assistance dog serving on the university campus on a daily basis. The first university student sensitizer dog of the country has a multifaceted task, it is not only performs tasks in the field of animal-assisted activity but also fulfills a socialization role with its presence, helping many to rethink their ideas about keeping animals. The study presents this socialization program.

**Keywords:** sensitizing dog, animal-assisted interventions (AAI), human-animal interactions (HAI)

**Discipline:** pedagogy

**Absztrakt**

AZ ÁLLATASSZISZTÁCIÓ ALKALMAZÁSA A DEBRECENI EGYETEM GYERMEKNEVELÉSI ÉS GYÓGYPEDAGÓGIAI KARÁN

Az egyetemi hallgatók körében alkalmazott állatasszisztáció nem ismeretlen, számos külföldi példa bizonyítja a létjogosultságát. A célzottan egyetemistákra irányuló alkalmazás az Amerikai Egyesült Államokból terjedt el és napjainkra már a világ számos országában alkalmazzák. A segítő kutyák megjelenése a

felsőoktatásban összefügg azzal a tudományos érdeklődéssel, amely a segítő állatok alkalmazása során tapasztalt pozitív hatások okainak feltárására és mérésére irányult. A Debreceni Egyetem Gyermeknevelési és Gyógypedagógiai Karán az állatasszisztációs képzés bevezetésével egy időben 2021-ben kezdődött meg az az egyetemista érzékenyítő program, amely keretében a hallgatók napi rendszerességgel találkozhatnak az egyetemi kampuszon szolgálatot teljesítő segítő kutyával. Az ország első egyetemista érzékenyítő kutyájának sokrétű feladata van, nem csak az állatasszisztált aktivitás terén végez munkát, hanem jelenlétével szocializációs szerepet is betölt, sokaknak segít az állattartásról kialakított képzeik újragondolásában. A tanulmány ezt a szocializációs programot mutatja be.

**Kulcsszavak:** érzékenyítő kutya, állatasszisztált aktivitások (AAI), ember-állat interakciók (HAI)

**Diszciplína:** neveléstudomány

Animal assistance used among university students is not unknown, numerous foreign examples prove its right to exist (Binfet, 2016; Barker, Barker & Schubert 2017; Crossman & Kazdin, 2015). The use aimed at university students appeared in the United States of America, but nowadays it is used in many countries of the world, especially in urbanized areas with an economically developed Anglo-Saxon culture, from Australia to Western Europe.

The emergence of assistance dogs in higher education is related to the scientific interest aimed at discovering and measuring the causes of the positive effects experienced during the use of assistance animals. The investigations that have proliferated since the end of the seventies were mostly carried out by research groups connected to universities, so it was obvious to involve a large number of university students as subjects of the research during various investigations. These studies also confirmed that students studying in tertiary education are in particular need of stress-reducing interventions (Barker, et al. 2016). Several studies have shown that the symptoms of financial pressure, stress, depression, and anxiety disorders are alarmingly high among students in higher education worldwide (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Eisenberg et al., 2007). 85% of American university

students feel overwhelmed, 40% feel anxious, and 30% claim that stress negatively affects their academic performance (Austin, et al. 2010). Students in tertiary education around the world show similar results. Thus, the studies were mostly focused on these areas, and animal-assisted interventions (Animal-Assisted Interventions) are used more and more often to promote the mental health of students and relieve students (Bell, 2013).

Even today, the university environment provides a good opportunity to document interventions at a scientific level and to develop measurement procedures. Therefore, more and more research is trying to explore the effects of AAIs on the mental, physiological, and cognitive performance of tertiary education students. Annalena Huber and her research team conducted a meta-analysis using thirty-five publications from animal-assisted cognitive or physiological health research conducted among students in higher education. The systematic review emerges that research investigating the effects of using animal assistance showed a general reduction in acute anxiety and stress. (Huber et al. 2022) In particular, the short-term benefits of AAI have been shown in research (Parbery-Clark et al. 2021). In the case of other mental processes, studies have measured a smaller but beneficial effect. At the same time, various researches aimed at measuring

changes in physiological or cognitive abilities have not shown a clear effect. The strong methodological heterogeneity between the studies did not allow clear conclusions to be drawn (Huber et al. 2022). Naturally, there are also examples of studies in many other areas, to name just one, the research on empathy was carried out at the University of Colorado, where they investigated – with the involvement of dogs – that for the involved university students whether animal or human suffering was more disturbing. (Levin, Arluke & Irvine, 2017). Research aimed at exploring the possibilities of animal assistance in talent care can also be a specific research direction (Mező, 2023: 213–216).

In Hungary, the University of Debrecen Faculty of Education for Children and Special Educational Needs has published the use of the university sensitizing dog reflecting domestic condition for the first time. In the first place, not the health or psychological but the social aspects are in the foreground of the application.

#### **Hungarian characteristics of the application of the university sensitizing dog**

Education for appropriate behavior and care towards animals is an important means of raising social morality. Act XXVIII of 1998 deals with the protection and welfare of animals in Hungary. The law states that education for proper behavior and care towards animals, and knowledge of animals must be included in general school education, vocational training, and knowledge dissemination, and state and local government bodies, as well as educational institutions, are obliged to promote the implementation of these tasks. In practice, however, the relevant bodies have not taken meaningful steps for more than twenty years. Despite the legal provision, public education neglects or does not discuss humane behavior towards animals, the topic of responsible animal husbandry, and there are only a few exceptions to this (363/2012. (XII.17.) Government Decree on the National Basic

Program of Kindergarten Education Annex No. 1 and No. 110/2012 on the publication, introduction and application of the National Basic Curriculum. (VI. 4.) Government Decree 1-2. §-a). At the same time, in recent years, partly at the initiative of teachers and partly thanks to NGOs, it has become more and more common for members of NGOs dealing with animal protection in kindergartens and schools to occasionally give lectures on the topic of responsible animal husbandry, and some animal protection NGOs even have developed educational programs. However, these options only offer ad hoc solutions.

As a matter of fact, education for the humane treatment of animals should be implemented in the family as the primary stage of the child's upbringing by the parents because the relationship with animals is fundamentally influenced by the patterns seen in the family. At the same time, in today's complex social milieu, very different life management strategies are presented at the same time, so the members of society are characterized by very different attitudes towards animals. Therefore, it has become necessary to acquire some kind of common minimum level, for which the institutional framework provides an adequate background. In order to be transferred this knowledge in educational institutions, it first must be appeared in teacher training.

At the University of Debrecen, Faculty of Education for Children and Special Educational Needs the animal-assisted postgraduate specialist training course and the practice-oriented university student sensitization program – within the framework of which students can meet the assistance dog at the university campus on a daily basis – were begun at the same time in 2021. The first university student sensitization dog of the country has a multifaceted task. It not only performs tasks in the field of animal-assisted activity; but also fulfills a socialization role with its presence, helping many people to rethink their ideas about animal husbandry.

### **Features of our own program**

The study presented below was carried out with the intention of preliminary research, the purpose of which was to observe and document the impact of the animal playing a sensitizing role at the university campus, as well as to learn about the characteristics and forms of attitudes towards the dog. Due to its nature, the purpose of the investigation was to map and establish further research opportunities.

The special orientation of the program also suggested the application of new research methods. The vast majority of studies known from the international literature rely on data collection using quantitative methods (as it is clear from the introduction of my article). At the same time, the research related to our university student sensitization program was qualitatively oriented at our university faculty. In the academic years of 2021/22 and 2022/23, we investigated the interactions of more than two hundred university students with sensitizing dogs in three different situations using the participant observation method over four semesters:

1. The dog regularly participated in the course dealing with the topic of the animal-human relationship, where the students had the opportunity to create a controlled relationship with the dog at the end of the lesson (being in control meant that the students could ask the dog to complete simple tasks and reward the animal with a treat if it was successful).
2. The dog took part in a course whose theme was not related to the issue of the human-animal relationship. At the end of the lesson, the instructor did not offer contact with the animal, but he provided opportunities for interactions in the case of students' request
3. Spontaneous contact was established on the individual initiative of students in an informal situation during the breaks between classes and after classes at the campus.

It was an important aspect that the students could always initiate the contact, which they were encouraged to do after the lesson dealing with the animal-human relationship, but in the other situations, the handler did not take the initiative; but helped the contact by giving advice on how to "make friends" with the dog. He suggested joint actions with the dog and also provided the students with reward snacks, with which they had a way to motivate the animal.

The aspects of our observations directed at the students were as follows:

- aspects of space use, distance from the dog, and contact with the dog
- nature and method of intention to establish contact
- interpretation of the intentions and behavior of the dog
- observing body language towards the dog
- verbalization of the situation with the dog

In research conducted in connection with AAI programs, the character traits of the used assistance dogs were often overlooked (Santaniello, et al. 2021), however, the characteristics of the dog used in our study were also important. When choosing an animal to act as a sensitizer, it was important to help overcome negative stereotypes about dogs as a species. Since in the Hungarian sociocultural milieu (just like in many other cultures) big black dogs are mostly rejected, it was obvious that a big black dog should fulfill this task. The animal used was a trained therapy dog, which did not wear a leash during its use, apparently nothing restricted its movement, but in fact, it was under the control of the handler.

### **The content of the contact**

During the observation, not only the presence of the dog; but also - through some very simple exercises - the interaction with the students were important. During the implementation of the exercises, it became possible to follow how enterprising

students establish a relationship and communication with a non-human being. The performance of the task and the way the animal was rewarded offered multiple pieces of information for the observer. For example, the handing over of a reward bite, when a large and initially distrustful animal takes a very small piece of food from the student's hand, can be interpreted as a situation of trust, in which not only the relationship towards the dog, but also the authority of the dog handler-teacher in the background play a role, since the student assumes that the situations created during university education are safe. During the presentation of the reward snack, the hands of the students inevitably got dog saliva, and the handling of this situation pointed to the hygienic aspects of the human-animal relationship.

Already at the beginning of the program, it was obvious that the students had different attitudes towards the therapy dog used. In the beginning, when the presence of the dog unexpectedly hit the students in the university environment, their different reactions were particularly evident. Essentially typifiable forms became observable:

**Fear:** initially several students showed fear reactions even though the presence and attention of the animal was not directed at them. During the university lectures, they chose places far from the dog. They didn't understand the dog's behavior at all, they did not know what his body language was telling, and they often evaluated his spatial approach as an attack. The conversations with the students revealed that in many cases the fear was fueled by previous bad experiences, but there were also students who had no previous personal experience with dogs, so essentially their fear of the unknown was manifested in their rejecting behavior. (Obviously, we respected the fear reactions in all cases, we did not initiate interaction, but we provided an opportunity for the student to try to approach).

**Overwhelming emotion:** there were students who responded to the dog's presence with heightened emotional reactions. They ran up to the dog and tried to make physical contact with it. Many people petted him, but some hugged and held the dog close. Students belonging to this type, despite their overflowing emotions, actually did not pay attention to the animal's reactions at all. They push into the animal's space, their movements express dominance, and they expect the dog to be happy for them. During the conversations, they emphasized their love of animals, especially their attraction to dogs. Several people also reported that they were dog owners themselves.

**Neutral:** there were those who showed no interest in the dog, accepted its presence, understood its role, but it did not provoke an emotional reaction from them. The dog, as another species, was basically uninteresting to them.

**Interested parties:** there were those who approached the dog with interest and sympathy, especially in the first period, when the dog appearing in an unusual situation was considered a novelty. They tried to get involved in the offered relationship-building tasks and it was an experience for them to control the animal.

### **Some experiences of the program**

Perhaps the two extremes emerged most spectacularly, the diffident and emotionally overheated reactions. These two groups had the smallest number of items. Most of them were among those who showed neutral reactions, but at the same time, many of them also took the course dealing with the relationship between dogs and humans.

- During the later conversations that processed the students' impressions, several students reported that they were afraid of the sensitizing dog at the university because of their previous negative experiences.

- There were those who had never met a dog that could be controlled without physical restrictions. Others recalled learning to dislike dogs as part of their family socialization.
- The same reaction was observed among the university groups as in kindergarten or elementary school, the positive reactions of the peer group resolved individual anxieties and resulted in braver, more proactive reactions to the therapy dog.
- For those students who approached the dog with overflowing emotions, the animal itself signaled by withdrawing from interactions and moving away from those approaching loudly or with violent movements. During the evaluation of unsuccessful relationships, the students had the opportunity to interpret animal and human behavior and body language afterwards, and to become aware of their anthropocentric behavior.
- Speaking situations that arise in the middle of petting dogs also provides opportunities for reviving and sharing previous experiences related to dogs.
- The lack of knowledge and the importance of the sensitizer used in the training was indicated by the fact that several people did not understand the behavior of the animal involved in dog-human communication despite the fact that they themselves are dog owners.

### Conclusion

Encounters with the sensitizing dog of the university can be considered an animal-assisted activity. Spanish psychologist Javier López-Cepero highlights the importance of AAIs as interventions aimed at improving human health that involve human-animal interactions (HAIs) involving animals (López-Cepero, 2020) and this is important because in most cultures living together with animals is a fundamental aspect of human

existence, however, this relationship often fades or becomes contradictory in the metropolitan conditions of global consumer societies. Some species we keep as pets and develop a strong social relationship with them, while others are seen only as a source of food. At the same time, climate change or the zoonotic Covid-19 also draws attention to the fact that it is essential to recognize the connection between people, animals and the environment. Closer synergy between humans, animals and the environment is becoming more and more important. This is what the sensitizing activity on our university faculty aims to promote at the local level, which, combined with knowledge transfer, provides empirical and theoretical knowledge. By becoming aware of the advantages and possibilities of AAI, students can consciously involve animals in the pedagogical work they lead while practicing their profession.

This study only covered the main characteristics and experiences of the preliminary research, due to reasons of scope it could not undertake a detailed presentation of the study, but perhaps the most important thing is to highlight that the relationship with animals is a constantly variable agent. This is also reflected in the variable nature of the positions observed during our research. As soon as the presence of the therapy animal became common during the daily routine, the initial anxieties of the students approaching the dog with reservations were resolved and this offered an opportunity to re-evaluate the animal-human relationship. It meant a lot that they experienced the controllability of the animal and also that it did not show aggressive behavior. Several of the students involved in the research reported that their fear reactions were alleviated by the behavior of their group mates who calmly approached the dog and by their observation that the interaction with the dog can be an experience.

The experiences offered by the program draw attention to the fact that the effect of the course

dealing with the dog-human relationship on student groups with different orientations may be the subject of further research.

Finally, we must also emphasize that animal welfare aspects played an important role throughout. The university sensitizing dog performed its task by moving freely on the university campus, so it was able to get out of stressful or tiring situations. There was no physical coercion that would have kept him in undesirable situations, and we also created a restroom for him, where stress-free rest was guaranteed for him.

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