

From theory to therapy room: a dog's point of view

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INTRODUCTION

Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) is a growing sector in human health care. Using animals as co-therapist urges for advice to guarantee the welfare of the animals involved. The goal of this study was to develop **guidelines for creating a dog-friendly therapy room**, keeping also human needs in mind.

METHODS

To this end, we combined a literature review of 300 papers on dogs' senses, physiological and behavioural needs with advisory groups of experts on these subjects and in-depth interviews with five AAT-therapists.

RESULTS: GUIDELINES

Activity room to initiate play and other guided activities.

Ideal room **temperature** for both humans and dogs is between 18° C and 22° C, depending on humidity, degree of activity and for dogs also the breed. Above 25° C, avoid active sessions since this increases the risk for heat stroke in dogs. Provide drinking water ad lib.



Avoid slippery **floors** by choosing for textured laminate floors, which are also easy to clean.

Allow the dog to seek shelter if he needs a break during a session. Forcing the dog will cause stress. Provide several **resting places** from which he can overlook the room.

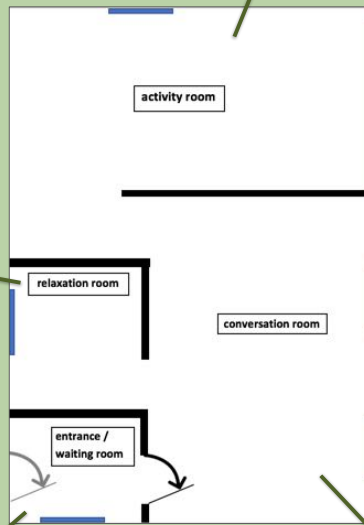
A cosy space for relaxing.



A dog's most important sensory input is **smell**. Avoid air refreshers or wearing strong perfume. Use cleaning products based on chlorhexidine and cetrimide like Hospital Antiseptic Concentrate (HAC). Baskets and dog blankets can be washed with water only, or add some vinegar. Note that lavender and chamomile have a calming effect on dogs and humans, as does soft easy listening music.



Dogs experience stress from loud (background) noises. Soundproof wall elements or partition walls mutes the **noise**.



Take the dog for a **walk** before and after sessions to avoid him using the outside area as a litter box.

An **outside** area with various natural elements (grass, trees, ...) creates extra room for therapeutic exercises, and stimulates natural behaviour in dogs.



Partly textured **windows** allow daylight inside and a view on natural elements, but withhold outside distraction for the dog.

Dogs' eyes can distinguish 70 to 80 frames per second. Light fluctuations in older fluorescent and LED lights have a stroboscopic effect on dogs' eyes. This very likely is a continuous nuisance to dogs since in humans it causes headaches. Use high frequency **light** sources instead (at least 100Hz).

DISCUSSION

These guidelines focus on general aspects of a dog's needs. However, it is important to remember that every dog is an individual with its own preferences, even though he is well-trained for AAT. Observe the dog's behaviour to notice signals of discomfort. Next to the physical environment, the quality of the relationship among therapist, dog and client highly effects the wellbeing of all parties.

WANT MORE? Besides the guidelines presented in this study, the ZorgBeest project developed guidelines on other topic regarding welfare of **dogs, cats and small farm animals** in AAI-settings. Interested? Take a look on www.zorgbeest.be

