

THE PROFESSOR PAWS PROJECT: INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATING STUDENTS ABOUT OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY AND SERVICE DOGS

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Background: Both service dogs and occupational therapists specialize in helping people to live their lives as independently as possible. Yet the general public has limited knowledge about either. The Professor Paws Project (PPP) is a service dog educational program that is dedicated to educating students, clinicians, and the community about the importance of service dogs and their public access rights. The PPP created a program to provide interactive education about careers in OT and about service dogs in an effort to raise awareness about both.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to determine if a program combining service dog education and information about careers in OT would improve understanding of service dogs and their purpose, as well as increase knowledge and peak interest in OT careers for 7th-12th grade students.

Methods: OT faculty and graduate research assistants developed and taught the program. The program included information regarding: 1) What occupational therapy is, 2) Occupational therapy careers, 3) Various therapeutic uses of dogs, 4) Benefits of service dogs, 5) Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and 6) How to behave around a service dog. The program concluded with an interactive demonstration of tasks that service dogs can do to help people. Participants were students ranging from 11-18 years of age in middle and high schools across Northeastern Oklahoma (N=735). Data was collected from students using a retrospective survey asking about their knowledge and interest in occupational therapy and service dogs before and after the presentation using a 10-point Likert scale. A paired sample t-test was used to determine change in knowledge and interest in OT and service dogs. Students were also asked to identify two things that they learned from the presentation.

Results: Results indicate a statistically significant increase in knowledge about service dogs and occupational therapy from before to after the presentation ($t = -41.604, P < 0.00$; $t = -31.225, P < 0.00$). Additionally, results showed a significant increase of interest in occupational therapy as a future career choice from before to after the presentation ($t = -21.529, P < 0.00$). Qualitative data was coded and themes identified. Qualitative data further supports the increase in knowledge, especially in following areas: types of service dogs, how to act around service dogs, laws surrounding service dogs, and understanding occupational therapy. The results of this study clearly suggest that student's knowledge and interest in OT and knowledge about service dogs increased as a result of this program.

Discussion/Conclusion: As a profession that has recently celebrated its 100th anniversary, it is imperative that we continue to educate stakeholders, students, and the community about our profession. In addition, we must continue to educate and advocate on behalf of the clients we serve. This education must be innovative and timely, starting with middle and high school students, so that the profession continues to grow and thrive. The Professor Paws Project model of combining service dog education with education about careers in OT is a successful model.

Relevance to Allied Health: This topic is relevant to allied health professionals because we should all be promoting our services and advocating for our professions to the community. Providing education about allied health professions to student who will soon be pursuing further education and joining the work force is a great way to encourage the growth and development of our professions. Additionally, many of the clients that allied health professionals serve are people who may benefit from the use of service dogs. The more the community understands service dogs and their benefits for people who need them, the fewer obstacles our clients with service dogs will face.