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What is animal-assisted therapy?

Animal-assisted therapy is when a therapist includes an animal in a goal-directed, structured service to help their clients engage in therapy. The animal usually belongs to the therapist or therapy organisation. They generally only have contact with the participant during the therapy session and don't stay with the client after the session is finished. They're generally included to help the client get the most out of their therapy session.

Therapists use different approaches, techniques and equipment to engage their clients. Some therapists who work with people with disability may include an animal in therapy sessions. Involvement of an animal is simply another tool a therapist can include as part of their program.

How is it different to animal therapy?

Animal therapy is not the same as animal-assisted therapy. Animal therapy is activities which are provided for people to have positive experiences with an animal. For example, engaging with puppies or riding a horse might be called animal therapy by the provider of the service. A recreational, sporting or social activity involving animals could also be called animal therapy. These activities are not animal-assisted therapy and are not NDIS supports, even if the provider of the service is an allied health professional.

Case

Feng has a psychosocial disability and asks us to fund a therapy program that includes an animal during the sessions. It's been recommended by his therapist. But the hourly rate for this program is higher than other therapy programs, which don't include an animal.

Would we fund this?

We would fund therapy programs that are an NDIS support for Feng's disability support needs as long as they meet the [NDIS funding criteria](#). But we won't fund therapy sessions that cost more than the maximum hourly price for therapy supports in the area where Feng lives. Feng can get quality therapy supports from a therapist

who doesn't include an animal and doesn't charge above the maximum hourly rate for this support.

Why wouldn't we fund it?

NDIS laws determine what we can and can't fund. Things we can fund are called NDIS supports. You can use the funding in your plan to buy NDIS supports if they're related to your disability and are in-line with your plan.

To decide if a support is an NDIS support for Feng, we look at the information he has given us against the [NDIS funding criteria](#).

We think about whether the therapy program is likely to be effective and beneficial for Feng, taking into account current good practice.

We'll work out whether a therapy program is value for money, comparing the benefits Feng would get from it with the cost of other supports. We'll see if there are other therapy programs Feng could choose that would achieve the same results at a much lower cost.

What else do we think about?

We also think about whether the therapy program you are asking for is an animal-assisted therapy or animal therapy. We won't fund:

- animal therapy. These are activities for you to have positive experiences with an animal. For example, a program where you engage with puppies or horses because they have a calming effect on you
- recreational, sporting or social activities involving animals
- therapy programs that aren't run by qualified therapists. For example, a horse-riding school running a horse therapy program, where there isn't an allied health professional working directly with you to achieve an evidence-based outcome. These programs won't be able to give evidence that the program will achieve the outcomes that your NDIS supports are funded to help you achieve. Therapy programs that aren't designed or delivered by qualified therapists could also be a risk of harm to you
- a therapy support where you're expected to own, buy or train your own animal, or where you need to take care of the animal in your own home after the session with your therapist. This is because animals, other than qualified and trained assistance animals, are unlikely to meet the [NDIS funding criteria](#).

See [Our Guideline – Assistance animals including dog guides](#) for more information.

Case example

Gale is 17 years old and lives with an intellectual disability. Gale is uncomfortable around people. She will withdraw or even panic if she needs to have social contact with anyone outside of her immediate family.

Gale's therapist has given a report that recommends a psychologist who helps young people who live with social anxiety. The psychologist includes an animal as part of their sessions. The therapist has given examples and evidence. These explain why this program is likely to help Gale with her social anxiety.

Gale's family sends the psychologist's recommendation to us and asks for funding for Gale to take part in the social anxiety therapy program.

When deciding whether the therapy support is an NDIS support for Gale, the planner looks at the information provided against the [NDIS funding criteria](#). The planner thinks about whether the support:

- will help Gale to mix with other people in the community, or get a job
- will be, or is likely to be, effective and beneficial for Gale, taking into account current good practice
- is value for money and the costs are reasonable, when compared to the cost of other supports that Gale could get benefit from.

In Gale's case the planner decides:

- based on the report from Gale's therapist, the program is likely to help Gale to overcome her social anxiety. This will help build Gale's confidence about having contact with people other than her family. This is also likely to help Gale to mix with others in the community or get a job
- the examples and evidence show that based on Gale's disability support needs, the inclusion of an animal in the session is likely to be effective and beneficial for the management of Gale's social anxiety.

The planner decides the program that includes an animal during the sessions meets our [NDIS funding criteria](#).

Case example

Carly is 12 years old and has autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Carly's family thinks she should get involved in some community activities. They believe this will help her learn to manage her behaviours and responses when she's with other people. They look for activities that will focus on helping her to manage her behaviour and emotions, to support her disability.

Carly's family report they want her to participate in an equine, or horse therapy program to facilitate her social participation and help manage her behaviours. They provide information about the service they've found that involves trail rides, mixing socially with other riders and learning how to ride and care for horses. The program is run by a local riding stable with riding instructors. There is no evidence an allied health professional is involved in designing or delivering the riding program.

The family take Carly for a trial visit and find that she responds well to horses. Based on the success of this visit, Carly's family asks us for funding for 12 months of visits. They include a brochure from the horse-riding school and letter from Carly's doctor which states:

- Carly seems to respond positively to animals, her 'face lights up' when she talks about horses in her therapy sessions
- learning to ride horses will improve Carly's self-confidence
- learning how to care for horses is likely to help Carly understand routines and responsibilities, which is part of her behavioural management goals
- being around people caring for horses will model calm, quiet behaviour which may help Carly to behave in a similar way and may improve her social skills.

Animal therapy is not a therapy support. Carly's horse-riding sessions are a recreational activity. While they may have social benefits for Carly, recreational activities are a day-to-day living cost. We can't fund day-to-day living costs that anyone would be expected to pay for. This means the horse-riding program is not an NDIS support so Carly can't use her NDIS funding to pay for it. Her family will need to pay for the program themselves if they would like Carly to take part.

If Carly needs help to take part in the program because of her disability support needs, then we could fund a support worker to go with her and help her during the sessions.

The planner decides the program doesn't meet our [NDIS funding criteria](#). The program isn't approved.

For more information, refer to:

- [Our Guideline - Reasonable and necessary supports](#)
- [Our Guideline – Assistance animals including dog guides](#)
- [Would we fund it – Pets and companion animals](#)
- [Would we fund it – Assistance animals](#)