

The use of simulated pets in dementia care



Background

Using robotic or plush animals, or what can sometimes be referred to as “simulated pets”, can provide an opportunity for people living with dementia to interact with a “life-like” animal that may bring therapeutic benefits. The most commonly used are dogs and cats.

Why use simulated pets?

- The tactile and sensory experiences provided by simulated pets may bring a sense of comfort and security to a person in distress by encouraging them to focus on a pleasant experience / memory.
- It may provide an opportunity for a person to ‘look after’ the animal and help with building / maintaining a sense of purpose and self-esteem.
- It may encourage people with dementia to reminisce about animals they once owned or talk about pets they still own thus providing a talking point for others close to the person to encourage conversation, and help to build rapport and a relationship if meeting them for the first time.
- If used creatively, simulated pets may be able to encourage a person living with dementia to eat, sleep better or partake in physical exercise.
- They may also help to bring a sense of routine and meaningful engagement that links to previous routines and habits.

Please note: This therapeutic intervention is not suitable for all people living with dementia.

Simulated pets have often been used as an alternative to medication to reduce the impact of behaviours and psychological symptoms of dementia, and such unmet needs as:

- Agitation
- Walking that is perceived as “restless or intrusive”
- Lack of meaningful stimulation / occupation
- Loneliness / social isolation
- Reduced sleep and appetite
- Underlying pain

Who is likely to benefit?

Depending on their level of interest, the following people are most likely to benefit from simulated pets:

- People who have always owned pets and animals throughout their life and those that may have fond childhood memories of owning pets.
- Those that frequently explore their environment and may engage in seeking out a pet.
- People who may perceive the simulated pet as a real animal and those who may enjoy the novelty aspect of it.

Introducing simulated pets

It's important that carers and family members are informed of the purpose and value of using simulated pets. Some people may see the simulated pet as infantile. It is important to introduce the aid in a respectful manner. The approach used may vary depending on the individual.

Some suggested approaches could include:

- Entering the person's room with the animal cradled in your arms and invite them to take a look at it.
- If the person does not notice what it is in your arms, you may wish to sit next to them and bring it to their attention.
- Upon their noticing, observe how the person reacts. If they enquire as to what it is, or ask questions about it, this may be a sign that they are interested and engaged.
- Proceed to offer the person the opportunity to touch or interact with the aid. If using a robotic animal it will respond when touched (for example, it may bark / purr and move their head to face the person).
- If the person's response is a positive one, you can proceed to offer them the aid.
- It is always important to mirror the person's response. If the person does not perceive it as real, they may still enjoy the 'novelty' aspect and you care share their enthusiasm with them.
- If the person appears distressed or feels it is “childish” remove it from the room.

Interacting with the person if a simulated pet has been introduced

- Consider offering the person the opportunity to look after the simulated pet for a few minutes, promising to return shortly to collect them.
- When returning to collect the simulated pet, observe how the person reacts when you do so. They may be happy to return or want to keep it with them. If the person becomes immediately attached to the simulated pet, they may find it distressing to have it removed so soon.

Care Staff Helpsheet

- Therefore it will be important to decide early on if the pet will be shared or solely belong to the person and who will be providing it, for example a family member.
- If they return it, ask them if they would like to look after it again later and gauge their response. If they say “yes” you may wish to suggest a date / time. This can then be repeated on-going, extending the time periods.
- If the person wants to look after the animal for the majority of the day they may be at risk of neglecting their own needs, for example focusing on feeding the simulated pet and not themselves. Therefore, you may wish to offer to look to after it when they have their meals or a shower. To encourage this, you can offer to help “feed the pet” or offer to take it for a walk so that the person feels safe that it is being looked after whilst they do something else.
- Also, other people may want to engage with the animal or refer to it as a “toy” which may distress the person. If this is a risk, it is advised to be mindful that this could happen and that others are re-directed appropriately (for example, to say “the pet is sleeping” or “it was a gift”).
- You may also wish to look after the animal if the person looking after it “needs a break” or they are finding it to be irritating for any reason. In these cases allow some time before re-introducing the simulated pet back to the person.
- Knowing the person’s background history prior to the introduction of simulated pets is essential. Simulated pets may have a negative impact on a person if they have a history of being hurt by an animal or it reminds them of losing a pet.
- Always respect the person’s perception of the simulated pets – if they perceive it to be a real cat or dog, avoid referring to it as a “robot” or a “toy”. If the person has given the pet a name you should use this.
- Equally, when handling the simulated pets, avoid picking it up by the head or tail or leaving the animal in a space which could be perceived as “dangerous” by the person, for example on top of a cupboard which could cause distress. With regards to the robotic simulated pets, be mindful that they will need their batteries changed so that they continue to operate at the level the person is used.
- Continue to monitor the person’s engagement with the simulated pets and ensure that the relationship is documented and shared with other carers if appropriate. Remember the person’s response to the activity may vary and if it doesn’t work initially it may be worth trialling again at a later stage – six months later for example.

Special considerations and precautions

- It’s important not to impose this activity on people who haven’t shown any interest as not everyone will respond to it. This may depend of the person’s background, culture and previous interactions with animals. If they didn’t like pets before, they are less likely to respond in a positive and beneficial way.

Infection control and risk management

- Always follow the manufacturer’s instructions for use, care and cleaning of the pet.
- Wash hands before and after handling the animal to avoid getting it dirty and to help prevent infection.
- Clean plastic surfaces with bacterial wipes after use.