



AAAIP

Association of Animal-Assisted
Intervention Professionals

The AAAIP Competencies



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Introduction

This document outlines attitudes, knowledge, skills, and abilities for the professional AAI practitioner. Whether you plan to incorporate your own animal or partner with a paraprofessional or volunteer to bring AAI to your clients, the competencies articulate that which is specific to AAI in addition to the competencies unique to your vocation.

The Code of Ethics is a set of wide-ranging, non-specific principles that govern decision making in AAI.

The Code of Conduct provides specific practices for behavior for those practicing AAI.

The AAI Specialist Competencies outline the knowledge necessary to practice AAI and are the basis for the AAI Specialist Certification (C-AAIS).

The Therapy Animal Team Competencies articulate the skills and abilities of both the handler and their therapy animal (generalized for canines). Practical evaluations of teams to assess readiness and safety in interacting with clients should map to these competencies.

The appendix of this document will be expanded as additional competencies specific to certain vocations are created. If you are interested in contributing to vocation-specific competencies, contact support@aaaiponline.org to inquire about a workgroup.

Code of Ethics

1. Perform duties that are consistent with your position and training.
2. Maintain adequate knowledge of, and adhere to, applicable ethics and professional standards.
3. Demonstrate a belief in and attitude of reverence for all life.
4. At all times, treat all animals, all people, and the environment with respect, dignity, and sensitivity, maintaining the quality of life and experience for all who are involved.
5. Be informed and educated about the current and emerging aspects and issues related to AAI.
6. Demonstrate commitment, responsibility, and honesty in all phases of your activities.
7. Comply with all local, state, and federal laws that govern AAI.

Code of Conduct

Those participating in animal-assisted interventions shall act in a manner that justifies public trust and confidence, enhances the reputation of our field, and safeguards the welfare of individual clients and participating animals.

Animals

- Prioritize the welfare of animals engaged in AAI, not only during sessions, but at home as well. Their welfare and well-being are to be placed above all other business considerations.
 - In practice, therapy animals who are sick, injured, fatigued, or otherwise unwell are not to be incorporated into sessions, even if that means a client may be disappointed or you anticipate a financial impact, such as a client cancellation.
- Structure interactions in such a way that therapy animals thrive—not simply tolerating, but actively enjoying their role.
 - In practice, for a therapy animal team who has worked together for several years, when the handler recognizes that their therapy animal is no longer showing approaching behaviors consistently, that might mean cutting back on the number or length of sessions as the animal works toward retirement.
- Engage in training methodologies and interactions with animals that are based on positive, relationship-building methodologies that do not intentionally cause fear or discomfort to the animal.
 - In practice, this means therapy animal handlers do not use intimidation to motivate their animal's behavior. This includes training tools such as shock, prong, and choke collars.

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- Be aware of, and comply with, applicable laws regarding animal licensure, vaccination, and restrictions based on species or breed.
 - In practice, if you partner with a specific breed of therapy animal and your municipality adopts a breed ban, the appropriate activity would be to work to change the law, rather than assume the law does not apply to your therapy animal of that breed. AAAIP recognizes that all breeds of dog can potentially be therapy animals.
 - Never falsely represent a therapy animal as a service animal.
 - In practice, therapy animal handlers do not take their therapy animals into public settings where pets would normally not be welcomed and allow staff to assume the animal is a service animal.
 - Never abuse, neglect, or mistreat animals, whether your own or someone else's.
 - In practice, failure to provide basic veterinary care is a form of neglect.

Clients

- Incorporate AAI only where there is reasonable expectation that it will be advantageous to the client. Refrain from providing guarantees regarding the specific outcomes of AAI sessions.
 - In practice, interventions should be grounded in an appropriate theoretical approach. Having a therapy animal present without a specific treatment plan is not professionalized AAI.
- Respect the client's right to treatment with informed and voluntary consent. Respect the client's right to refuse, modify, or terminate interactions regardless of prior consent given.
 - In practice, if your client asks that your therapy animal no longer be present in session, you must respect that choice, even if that means making arrangements or changes to your schedule to ensure that your animal is not in the room at the same time as your client.
- Take all reasonable steps to ensure safety and prevent harm to clients.
 - In practice, this could include steps ranging from screening clients for phobias and past animal-related trauma to never leaving your client and therapy animal together unsupervised.
- Be aware of, and comply with, applicable laws regarding the reporting of injuries caused by animals (e.g., bites).
 - In practice, incident management may involve several steps including your own documentation, informing your insurance provider, and reporting certain types of animal-related injuries to your Department of Health or Animal Control. It's your responsibility to understand the requirements of your municipality as well as your insurance provider.

The Field of AAI

- Support the implementation of and compliance with standards and best practices in AAI.
 - In practice, you are helping the field of AAI to grow in popularity as well as respect. As others enter the field of AAI you can help educate them on standards and best practices in the field.
- Represent your qualifications honestly, including education, competencies, and professional affiliations, and provide only those services you are qualified to perform.
 - In practice, if our goal is to have AAI regarded as a well-respected professional endeavor, we must represent our training and experience accurately. As such, someone should not advertise that they are offering AAT unless they are a licensed mental or allied health professional.
- Never provide advice or recommendations in areas of veterinary medicine, animal behavior, or human and/or mental health services unless qualified to do so.
 - In practice, while you might be very knowledgeable about your animal, as an AAI practitioner it is outside your scope of practice to make recommendations to a client about their own animal's health or behavior.
- Maintain adequate liability insurance coverage inclusive of AAI activities.
 - In practice, it is your responsibility to understand your coverage and ensure that your AAI activities are covered, and that you are not relying on a policy with exclusions for animals in the workplace.
- Never display acts of discrimination, acts of hate, acts of violence, bullying, sexual harassment, coercion, intimidation, or any act of that impedes or interferes with anyone's civil rights.
 - In practice, you are a representative of a growing field that is seeking to firmly establish its position as a well-respected complementary treatment modality for human health and well-being. Behavior that intentionally does not support the health and well-being of another individual or group is counter to the goals of AAI.

Certified Animal-Assisted Intervention Specialist

Who can be an AAI Specialist?

Professionals who successfully obtain their AAI-S certification will have demonstrated an awareness of these knowledge areas and are thus prepared to adhere to best practices in AAI that protect client safety and animal welfare. A certified AAI specialist may work in a variety of settings that incorporate therapy animals. AAI specialists may be practitioners who handle therapy animals themselves, those who partner with volunteers or paraprofessionals who handle

therapy animals under their supervision, and those who coordinate or administrate therapy animal programs.

How was the certification exam developed?

The first step in developing this exam was to identify the knowledge and skills an AAI professional must have. This process included convening a panel of 15 experts to create a draft of the foundational body of knowledge and refining the draft over a series of independent reviews and web conference discussions. The draft was then empirically validated by surveying 217 AAI professionals who reviewed the knowledge and skill statements for accuracy, completeness, and relevance. Finally, another group of subject matter experts were convened to write exam questions that map to the knowledge and skill statements, with the oversight of a psychometrician.

What body of knowledge does the C-AAIS exam cover?

The Animal-Assisted Intervention Specialist (AAI-S) certification exam assesses professional knowledge in integrating AAI as a complementary treatment modality within an existing scope of practice. Content covered consists of 115 statements across 5 different topic areas that were deemed essential during development. The exam does not cover content specific to any vocation, field, or practice, although some questions are written as scenarios and may mention a role such as occupational therapist as a way of providing context.

AAI Specialist Competencies

Domain 1: Animal Welfare and Well-being (~33% of exam)

Characteristics of Welfare (~21% of domain)

1. Differentiate between the 5 Freedoms of animal welfare.
2. Recognize that therapy animals deserve more than basic characteristics of animal welfare.
3. Identify measures that protect animal welfare within sessions incorporating therapy animals.
4. Identify measures that protect animal welfare outside of sessions incorporating therapy animals.
5. Recognize the individualized nature of animal welfare (e.g., species, age, disability, and other individual animal characteristics).
6. Differentiate between the needs of the client and the therapy animal.
7. Identify measures that protect an animal's sense of wellness during AAI (e.g., time limits, retreat spaces, rewards).
8. Identify considerations to be made in determining an animal's quality of life to inform decisions surrounding retirement and end-of-life circumstances.

Animal Behavior (~13% of domain)

1. Identify active animal consent.
2. Identify the various responses a therapy animal can have to a petting consent test (e.g., avoidance, acceptance, enjoyment).
3. Differentiate between active consent, obedience, and compliance.
4. Identify an animal's suitability/limitations on a situational basis despite a potential emotional bond with or personal bias towards the animal.
5. Identify signs of animal stress/fatigue.

Animal Awareness and Response (~16% of domain)

1. Identify routine protocols for assessing animal health and well-being.
2. Identify strategies used to respond to animal stress/fatigue.
3. Identify an action plan in advance to defuse or eliminate animal stress and any growing risks.
4. Identify when an animal should be removed from a session/interaction.
5. Identify when an animal should be retired, based upon behavior.
6. Identify steps to take during the process of retirement (e.g., preparing the animal, preparing your clients, altering treatment plans as needed).

Clients and Animals—Communicating and Intervening (~24% of domain)

1. Identify a client's suitability for involvement in AAI (e.g., motor and/or cognitive functioning, prior experiences with animals, history of animal abuse, fit with treatment objectives, psychological conditions associated with anger or violence).
2. Identify a client's need for animal-related engagement (e.g., virtual visits, animal-based activities).
3. Identify appropriate messaging to inform clients about their role in protecting animal welfare.
4. Identify appropriate strategies for communicating an animal's actions to clients.
5. Identify situations when the handler's attention may be divided between client and animal, to the detriment of either.
6. Identify strategies for managing conflicts of attention between client and animal.
7. Identify appropriate instruction for clients to minimize risk of physical/emotional injury to the animal.
8. Recognize the ways in which the presence of a therapy animal impacts the professional's relationship with clients.
9. Recognize how our clients are impacted when it comes time to terminate AAI services or if the animal becomes unwell or dies.

Health and Safety (~11% of domain)

1. Identify environmental factors that promote the animal's comfort.
2. Identify routine veterinary care necessary for therapy animals.
3. Recognize the need to acquire and maintain up-to-date veterinary records for all therapy animals.
4. Identify health conditions warranting consideration that could potentially preclude an animal from therapy work (e.g., blindness, deafness, diabetes, thyroid disease).

Encouraging a Sense of Thriving (~11% of domain)

1. Identify tactics for providing therapy animals with freedom of choice in session.
2. Classify interactions that are mutualistic for clients and therapy animals.
3. Identify appropriate rewards to give to therapy animals in session.
4. Identify the value of a reward based upon the perspective of the animal.

Appropriate Language Choices (~5% of domain)

1. Identify language that does not suggest the “use” of animals in AAI (e.g., *partnering* with therapy animals, *incorporating* therapy animals, *working with* therapy animals).
2. Identify language that focuses on treatment outcomes being dependent upon the expertise of the professional, not the animal. (e.g., avoiding language that suggests that the animal caused treatment objectives to be met when it can be more appropriately described as the intervention as a whole impacting change).

Domain 2: Zoonosis and Infection Prevention (~13% of exam)

Common Sources of Zoonosis (~33% of domain)

1. Identify the most common methods of disease transmission in AAI.
2. Identify the most common zoonotic disease risks (e.g., salmonella).
3. Distinguish between zoonosis and other infections.
4. Define reverse zoonosis.
5. Recognize that sources of zoonosis differ by species.

Best Practices for Mitigation (~47% of domain)

1. Identify conditions of the animal's health that would preclude safe interactions.
2. Identify conditions of the handler's health that would preclude safe interactions.
3. Identify preventative measures/opportunities to mitigate risks of infection prevention (e.g., hand hygiene, vaccination, preventative meds, raw diet, bathing, grooming, cleaning, barriers).
4. Identify special considerations for infection prevention based on facility type (e.g., hospital).

5. Identify special considerations for population-specific infection prevention risks (e.g., health status).
6. Recognize the need for specific protocols to be in place when working with volunteer therapy animal handlers (e.g., health screening, appropriate vaccines).
7. Recognize that risk of infection spread is impacted by conditions unique to the setting (e.g., indoor vs. outdoor, population density).

Considerations for Prevention Protocols (~20% of domain)

1. Recognize that there are illnesses that therapy animals and people can be protected from by following infection prevention best practices.
2. Identify methods to inform clients of the risks associated with AAI during the consent process.
3. Recognize the need for/importance of animal-friendly cleaning and disinfecting protocols.

Domain 3: Animal Behavior Awareness (~19% of exam)

Animal training and understanding an affiliative nature (~32% of domain)

1. Identify species-appropriate trained behaviors (e.g., sit, down, stay for dogs; step up for birds; walk on, whoa, stand in place for equines).
2. Recognize the rationale for a therapy animal having predictable and directable behaviors as achieved through the training process.
3. Identify times in which training cues should not be used to motivate therapy animal behavior.
4. Identify approaching behaviors.
5. Identify avoidant behaviors.
6. Identify an affiliative nature.
7. Identify when an animal is acting with agency (i.e., based on consent) rather than compliance.

Positive Training Methodologies (~23% of domain)

1. Distinguish between compulsive training methodologies as compared to positive/relationship-based methodologies.
2. Classify training techniques as appropriate or inappropriate.
3. Recognize positive training methodology perspectives.
4. Recognize the rationale for always using positive training methods and avoiding fear-based or coercive training methods.
5. Distinguish between reactive, proactive, and inactive/passive handling.

Handling Best Practices (~45% of domain)

1. Recognize that giving an animal the ability to choose interactions is essential to safety and welfare in AAI.

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2. Recognize that interpreting and responding to body language cues is essential to safe AAI.
 3. Distinguish between proactive and reactive stress management of an animal.
 4. Identify closure strategies that balance the needs of animal and client.
 5. Identify characteristics of appropriate clientele for an individual animal.
 6. Identify appropriate positioning for an animal that balances the needs of animal and client.
 7. Recognize how the handler's bond/connection with the animal protects all parties in the intervention.
 8. Identify strategies for directing the animal through voice or hand signals.
 9. Identify ways to support an animal in changing environments/situations (e.g., sudden movement or sound).
 10. Identify appropriate approaches for incorporating different species of therapy animals (e.g., prey animals like rabbits, and large animals like horses).

Domain 4: AAI Foundations (~16% of exam)

Key Terminology (~28% of domain)

1. Differentiate between these terms: animal-assisted interventions, animal-assisted therapy, animal-assisted education, animal-assisted activities, animal-related engagement.
2. Differentiate between *registered* and *certified* when discussing therapy animals.
3. Recognize the relevance of One Health within AAI.
4. Define human-animal bond.
5. Define human-animal interaction.

Different Animal Roles (~17% of domain)

1. Differentiate between the various kinds of animal roles: *therapy animal*, *assistance animal* (commonly referred to as *service animal*), *emotional support animal*, *facility animal*.
2. Differentiate between the accommodation rights of each animal based on the animal's role.
3. Recognize dangers of misrepresentation of therapy animals.

Advocacy for the Field (~17% of domain)

1. Identify communication strategies that can be used to clearly educate clients about therapy animals.
2. Identify best practices that should be represented in any involvement in empirical research with therapy animals.
3. Recognize that involvement in research results in contributing to the evidence base to support AAI.

State of the Literature (~28% of domain)

1. Recognize that there is empirical literature to support AAI interventions in assisting with mental and physical health and well-being across the lifespan.
2. Identify the resources that should be used to stay up to date on the state of the research.
3. Recognize that there are still gaps in the literature related to AAI.
4. Identify significant limitations in the existing AAI literature (e.g., lack of randomization, small sample sizes, lack of study replication).
5. Recognize the inappropriateness of overgeneralizing or making stronger claims than are justified based on the existing empirical evidence.

Common Theories Applied to AAI (~11% of domain)

1. Recognize the application of the Biopsychosocial Model as theoretical support for AAI.
2. Recognize that there are other common psychological theories relevant to specific aspects of AAI (e.g., attachment theory).

Domain 5: Professional Best Practices (~19% of exam)

Documentation (~36% of domain)

1. Identify key aspects to include in AAI informed consent documentation.
2. Identify areas specific to therapy animals that should be consistently documented (e.g., training, health records, evaluation records, working logs).
3. Recognize the need for working logs that regularly document the animal's behavior whether it be weekly, monthly, biannually, or other consistent time frame.
4. Recognize that AAI should be reflected in treatment planning notes.
5. Recognize the need for documenting the practitioner's well-supported rationale for incorporating AAI.
6. Identify a system for identifying, tracking, and resolving incidents and perceived incidents.
7. Recognize the need for an individualized risk assessment prior to beginning AAI with a client, and the need for periodic routine risk assessment.
8. Recognize the need to document the process of informing clients of the risks associated with AAI during the consent process.

Special Considerations (~28% of domain)

1. Identify social and cultural factors relevant to AAI and multicultural implications of human-animal interactions.
2. Recognize the impact of fears and phobias in AAI.

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3. Identify common misconceptions of common therapy animal species/breeds (e.g., certain breeds of dogs are more suited for therapy work).
 4. Identify inaccurate generalizations of common therapy animal species (e.g., small is more appropriate).
 5. Identify history and cultural oppression associated with common animal species/breeds.
 6. Identify contraindications for non-domesticated and exotic species as therapy animals (e.g., lack of empirical support and/or safe and ethical standards of practice for programs with animals such as dolphins).

Competencies (~18% of domain)

1. Identify knowledge competencies for AAI practitioners including: formal AAT training, in-depth animal knowledge, and knowledge of existing ethical requirements.
2. Identify skill competencies for AAI practitioners, including proficiency in basic vocational skills, intentionality, and having a specialized skill set.
3. Identify attitude competencies for AAI practitioners, including professional values and the commitment to animal advocacy and professional development.
4. Recognize that competency levels vary according to a person's level of knowledge, skill, and attitude.

Different Approaches to AAI (~18% of domain)

1. Distinguish between the triangle and diamond approaches to AAI.
2. Identify the factors that should be considered in selecting which approach (triangle vs. diamond) to use.
3. Identify best practices when utilizing a volunteer handler and their therapy animal (e.g., HIPAA training, any specialized population/context training, background checks).
4. Identify strategies for animal-related engagement (e.g., virtual visits, animal-based activities) when face-to-face visits aren't appropriate.

Assessing Therapy Animal Teams

What is a therapy animal team?

A therapy animal team is defined as a unique handler-animal pair working together to deliver any form of AAI including AAT, AAE and AAA. The handler may be a paid professional or paraprofessional or an unpaid volunteer.

Why do therapy animal teams need to be assessed?

An independent third-party assessment helps ensure safe therapy animal interactions. While therapy animal handlers often know their animal best, it can be hard to be objective about your own pet. For this reason, insurance providers often want to see evidence that a team has been evaluated and continues to be evaluated on a recurring basis. As a responsible handler, you may also wish to be evaluated as a team to see if there are any areas in which you need to improve.

How are therapy animal teams assessed?

Historically there have been limited options for professionals seeking therapy animal team assessments. Many have opted to be evaluated by a volunteer therapy animal program, as they have an existing infrastructure. AAAIP is developing an option for professionals seeking assessment. Regardless, evaluations should address the Therapy Animal Team Competencies, which cover both handler skills and animal skills.

What are the standards for therapy animal team assessments?

The goal of a team assessment is to ensure that a therapy animal and their handler have the baseline skills to be both safe and effective when interacting with others. These baseline skills are articulated in the Therapy Animal Team Competencies. Additionally, team assessments should address the relevant Standards of Practice in AAI. These include recurring assessments not to exceed every three years, a practical location that simulates a setting where interactions will take place, and an evaluator with relevant training about the species as well as AAI with whom the animal is not overly habituated.

How were the competencies determined?

As with the skills and knowledge statements for the AAI Specialist role, the therapy animal team competencies were developed by a team of ten subject matter experts consisting of dog trainers, animal behaviorists, veterinarians, service dog trainers, allied health professionals with AAI expertise, and current therapy animal team evaluators. They created a draft of skills statements for both the animal and the handler. These skills statements were then empirically validated by surveying 200 AAI stakeholders, 96% of whom had direct experience handling therapy animals and 71% of whom had practical experience evaluating therapy animals in some capacity.

Therapy Animal Team Competencies

Domain 1: Handler Behaviors

Handler Competencies

1. Recognize the animal's body language, including signs of contentment, concern, or stress, while keeping in mind that body language cues differ by individual animal.

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2. Interpret the animal's body language and respond appropriately using a supportive approach.
 3. Proactively anticipate the animal's response to the environment (e.g., physical, social, etc.) and make choices (including supportive actions) to optimize the situation for the animal.
 4. Recognize the difference between behaviors which are requested by the handler and behaviors which are voluntary.
 5. Demonstrate an appropriate awareness of/attentiveness to the animal at all times (e.g., split attention between the animal and other situations when necessary).
 6. Groom the animal appropriately (e.g., clean, untangled coat; nails smooth and shortened; no foul odors coming from mouth or ears, etc.)
 7. Consider the animal's emotional and physical well-being and refrain from participating in sessions when necessary (e.g., animal has an unacceptable body condition/score, is unable to ambulate, shows respiratory distress, shows other signs of distress, etc.).

Interactions with the Animal

1. Regularly and appropriately praise, encourage, and reassure the animal during interactions through the use of touch, mutual eye contact, verbal cues, and close proximity.
2. Use a respectful, conversational tone of voice when addressing the animal (i.e., not pleading, angry, or harsh).
3. Enable the animal to make choices about interactions (i.e., handler does not coerce interactions).
4. Use positive reinforcement methods of training to encourage desirable behaviors.
5. Never use physical intimidation (e.g., striking, ear pinching, shock collars, etc.) to punish or coerce behavior.
6. Demonstrate proper leash skills while animal is leashed (i.e., the leash is used to guide but not control the animal).

Interactions with the Client

1. Ask for consent from the client before an interaction begins.
2. Tactfully intervene when necessary and redirect the client to change or cease their actions if needed to ensure the animal's well-being.
3. Interact with the client professionally, respectfully, empathetically, and in a conversational manner.
4. Provide appropriate closure to the interaction with the client.

Interactions with the Animal and Client

1. Proactively introduce the animal to the client, providing clear instruction on how the client should interact with the animal (e.g., the client should not need to ask how to best pet the

animal or if they like belly rubs, the handler should instruct how to safely give the animal a treat, etc.).

2. Lead clients through interactions with animals, making sure to inform them that interactions are dependent upon the animal's preferences.
3. Position the animal, or if necessary, carry a small animal in a manner that promotes animal/client interaction, is optimal and safe for the client, and is in the best interest of the animal's well-being.

Domain 2: Animal Behaviors

Basic Appropriate Animal Behavior

1. Demonstrate core obedience skills, including, but not limited to, keeping all feet on ground when greeting, and properly responding to "sit", "down", "stay", "wait", "come", "leave it".
2. Demonstrate proper leash skills while leashed (e.g., the animal does not pull/strain when on a leash).
3. Be house trained and not eliminate indoors.
4. When necessary, accept being handled/touched with handler's assistance or guidance (e.g., feet touched, ears lifted, and similar), and without displaying excessive stress signals or overstimulation.

Animal's Behavior with Handler

1. Demonstrate/maintain a connection to the handler (e.g., frequent eye contact, looks to the handler for direction, etc.).
2. Respond to handler's cues in a timely manner without demonstrating significant discomfort or distress.
3. Recover promptly (may include redirection) from stress/negative stimuli with the support of the handler before beginning further interactions.

Animal's Behavior with Client

1. Generally demonstrate relaxed/content body language throughout the entire session and during interactions with clients.
2. Generally demonstrate approaching behaviors and seek out interactions with clients (e.g., nudging face/nose against client, presenting toy to client, etc.) after checking in with handler.
3. With the direction and support of the handler, demonstrate an appropriate level of eagerness (e.g., orients head towards client, open mouth, relaxed facial expression, etc.) and physical interaction (e.g., animal should not demonstrate excessive vocalization, mouthing, uncontrolled exuberance, jumping up on people/furniture, etc.).

Appendix

AAAIP is in the process of convening vocation specific workgroups to determine if a particular professional role may have additional knowledge or skill competencies. As a result, this document will be regularly updated as that work is completed. If you are interested in participating in a vocational workgroup, please contact us at support@aaaiponline.org.



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