



AAAIP

Association of Animal-Assisted
Intervention Professionals



ANIMAL-ASSISTED INTERVENTION SPECIALIST (AAI-S)

PRACTICE ANALYSIS | VERSION 2020



ANIMAL-ASSISTED INTERVENTION SPECIALIST

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. The first step in developing this exam was to complete a practice analysis to identify the knowledge an AAI professional must have. This process included:

- ✔ Convening a panel of 15 experts to create a draft of the foundational body of knowledge.
- ✔ Refining the draft over a series of independent reviews and web conference discussions.
- ✔ Surveying 217 AAI professionals to confirm the validity of the drafted knowledge and skill statements.

The end product is this document, which articulates 115 statements in five different topic areas that have been deemed essential by the field. 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.

DOMAIN 1

Animal Welfare and Well-being

(~33% of exam)

Characteristics of Welfare (~21% of domain)

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

Animal Behavior (~13% of domain)

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

Animal Awareness and Response

(~16% of domain)

- Identify routine protocols for assessing animal health and well-being.
- Identify strategies used to respond to animal stress/fatigue.
- Identify an action plan in advance to defuse or eliminate animal stress and any growing risks.
- Identify when an animal should be removed from a session/interaction.
- Identify when an animal should be retired, based upon behavior.
- 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)

- 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).
- Identify a client's need for animal-related engagement (e.g., virtual visits, animal-based activities).
- Identify appropriate messaging to inform clients about their role in protecting animal welfare.
- Identify appropriate strategies for communicating an animal's actions to clients.
- Identify situations when the handler's attention may be divided between client and animal, to the detriment of either.
- Identify strategies for managing conflicts of attention between client and animal.
- Identify appropriate instruction for clients to minimize risk of physical/emotional injury to the animal.
- Recognize the ways in which the presence of a therapy animal impacts the professionals' relationship with clients.
- 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)

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

Encouraging a Sense of Thriving

(~10% of domain)

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

Appropriate Language Choices

(~5% of domain)

- 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).
- 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)

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

Best Practices for Mitigation

(~47% of domain)

- Identify conditions of the animal's health that would preclude safe interactions.
- Identify conditions of the handler's health that would preclude safe interactions.
- Identify preventative measures/opportunities to mitigate risks of infection prevention (e.g., hand hygiene, vaccination, preventative meds, raw diet, bathing, grooming, cleaning, barriers).
- Identify special considerations for infection prevention based on facility type (e.g., hospital).
- Identify special considerations for population-specific infection prevention risks (e.g., health status).
- Recognize the need for specific protocols to be in place when working with volunteer therapy animal handlers (e.g., health screening, appropriate vaccines).
- 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)

- Recognize that there are illnesses that therapy animals and people can be protected from by following infection prevention best practices.
- Identify methods to inform clients of the risks associated with AAI during the consent process.
- 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)

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

Positive Training Methodologies

(~23% of domain)

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

Handling Best Practices (~45% of domain)

- Recognize that giving an animal the ability to choose interactions is essential to safety and welfare in AAI.
- Recognize that interpreting and responding to body language cues is essential to safe AAI.
- Distinguish between proactive and reactive stress management of an animal.
- Identify closure strategies that balance the needs of animal and client.
- Identify characteristics of appropriate clientele for an individual animal.
- Identify appropriate positioning for the animal that balances the needs of animal and client.
- Recognize how the handler's bond/connection with the animal protects all parties in the intervention.
- Identify strategies for directing the animal through voice or hand signals.
- Identify ways to support an animal in changing environments/situations (e.g., sudden movement or sound).
- 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)

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

Different Animal Roles (~17% of domain)

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

Advocacy for the Field (~17% of domain)

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

State of the Literature (~27% of domain)

- Recognize that there is empirical literature to support AAI interventions in assisting with mental and physical health and well-being across the lifespan.
- Identify the resources that should be used to stay up to date on the state of the research.
- Recognize that there are still gaps in the literature related to AAI.

- Identify significant limitations in the existing AAI literature (e.g., lack of randomization, small sample sizes, lack of study replication).
- Recognize the inappropriateness of overgeneralizing or making stronger claims than is justified based on the existing empirical evidence.

Common Theories Applied to AAI

(~11% of domain)

- Recognize the application of the Biopsychosocial Model as theoretical support for AAI.
- 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)

- Identify key aspects to include in AAI informed consent documentation.
- Identify areas specific to therapy animals that should be consistently documented (e.g., training, health records, evaluation records, working log).
- Recognize the need for working logs that regularly document the animal's behavior whether it be weekly, monthly, or biannually.
- Recognize that AAI should be reflected in treatment planning notes.
- Recognize the need for documenting the practitioner's well-supported rationale for incorporating AAI.
- Identify a system for identifying, tracking, and resolving incidents and perceived incidents.
- Recognize the need for an individualized risk assessment prior to beginning AAI with a client, and the need for periodic routine risk assessment.
- 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)

- Identify social and cultural factors relevant to AAI and multicultural implications of human-animal interactions.
- Recognize the impact of fears and phobias in AAI.
- Identify common misconceptions of therapy animal species/breeds (e.g., certain breeds of dogs are more suited for therapy work).
- Identify inaccurate generalizations of therapy animal species (e.g., small is more appropriate).
- Identify history and cultural oppression associated with therapy animal species/breeds.
- 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)

- Identify knowledge competencies for AAI practitioners including: formal AAT training, in-depth animal knowledge, and knowledge of existing ethical requirements.
- Identify skill competencies for AAI practitioners including: mastery of basic vocational skills, intentionality, and having a specialized skill set.

- Identify attitude competencies for AAI practitioners including: professional values and the commitment to animal advocacy and professional development.
- Recognize that competency levels vary according to a person's level of knowledge, skill, and aptitude.

Different Approaches to AAI (~18% of domain)

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





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