



Animal therapy boosts kids' health and hope

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South Florida Parenting

Throughout South Florida and around the world, various forms of animal therapy are used as a means to help children overcome physical, emotional and learning challenges.

Dolphins, horses, dogs, cats and even a few farm animals pitch in at programs from Loxahatchee to the Keys to make life a little easier and more enjoyable for kids with major illnesses, special needs, or even stage fright.

Studies of animal therapy have shown repeatedly that exposure to animals helps improve morale and communication, bolster self-esteem, calm anxiety - even reduce blood pressure and heart rate.

Specific animal therapies can augment traditional physical, occupational or even speech therapy. Animals used in therapy help children, often with severe challenges, to feel better about themselves.

The choice of an appropriate animal-therapy program is largely dependent on individual likes and dislikes, as well as therapeutic needs. Doctors and therapists who are already working with a child may be able to suggest animal therapy to assist in the ongoing therapy. Issues such as allergies and fears, as well as costs, all play a part in decision-making.

A pioneering approach

The use of animals to assist in therapy may go back centuries. There is evidence that horses were used for therapeutic riding in ancient Greek literature. But animal therapy as a practice is a relatively new phenomenon.

Horses have been used continuously this century in physical therapy, especially for people who were paralyzed by injury or polio. But it wasn't until the 1990s that standards were set for a clinical practice in horseback riding therapy, or hippotherapy.

Similarly, the use of pets - dogs, mostly, but also a few cats - in therapy for psychiatric and nursing home patients goes back only to the 1960s. Today, pets are used to ease hospital patients' anxiety, help children who are anxious about learning to read, and for a number of other calming and esteem-building therapies for learning disabled, autistic, ill and physically disabled children and adults.

Pet therapy for many needs

non-threatening, environment. The Humane Society of Broward County's Wags and Tales Reading Program offers children ages 5-12 who are reluctant to read or who have literacy deficiencies the chance to read to a pet therapy dog at one of nine libraries in Broward County. The dog, of course, doesn't care whether the child misses a word. But the child's esteem and ability to read grows.

"It breaks down the barriers of insecurity," says Marni Bellavia, the humane society's education partnership coordinator.

The dogs are not the only participants who are attuned to the needs of their charges. The pet owners who volunteer with their dogs to participate in the 2-year-old program "are highly sensitive to every situation," Bellavia says. Bellavia herself started as a volunteer. She now oversees the pet-assisted therapy program, working with 115 volunteers and about 80 facilities, including schools, children's hospitals and nursing homes, primarily in Broward, but also in Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties.

Most of the children served are in hospitals; many are wheelchair-bound with significant disabilities. The way the children interact with the pets for therapeutic purposes is determined by their rehabilitative program.

"A child can be aggressive, and we use animals to teach them to be calmer," she says. "We show them the proper way to stroke a pet, which can reduce blood pressure and stress. If the child's problem is focusing, we have them make eye contact as the dogs move around the room." In the case of a blind child, "it's all about touch and sense of smell, so we have a dog there to touch," she said.

A paraplegic child can benefit from socializing therapy, by meeting a trained dog and talking about the animal. Dexterity can be enhanced by filling the dog's water bowl. A child hospitalized with a broken leg might benefit from walking a dog on a leash, while a child who has difficulty grasping can work on holding a dog's brush or leash.

Whatever a child's challenges are, Bellavia says, with 140 dogs, two cats and their trained and certified owner-volunteers, she is likely to have a team that can help - although, like many such programs, more volunteers are always welcome. "We're always looking for volunteers and dogs," she says. "We're not even close to having enough." And while her programs work primarily with dogs, Bellavia points out that pet therapy can also include more exotic animals, such as llamas and birds.

"Pet therapy," she said, "is a huge world." For kids like Megan Baldwin, it is one that can make a world of difference.

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