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Update

Animal Assistance Part I

The Use of Animal Assistance at Child Advocacy Centers

by *Rena Marie Justice*¹

Animals are such agreeable friends—they ask no questions, they pass no criticisms.

—George Eliot²

There has always been a strong bond between humans and animals. As far back as civilization, animals have been workers, protectors, and faithful companions. Over the last few decades, human-animal bonds have been scientifically studied and the effects that many have believed intuitively have been supported. Today, even the child protection and criminal justice systems are forming a deeper understanding of the effects and benefits of animals, particularly in the area of child abuse. This two-part article will first explore starting an animal assistance program at a local child advocacy center. The second part will look at the use of animals in the courtroom, as “comfort items” or “support persons.”

Research

There are many studies demonstrating the calming and positive physiological benefits for humans who work with or around animals. In one study, healthy children were examined by a doctor, with and without a dog present. Those children who had a dog present showed significantly greater reductions in behavioral distress and physiological parameters of stress, including decreases in systolic blood pressure, mean arterial pressure, and heart rate.³ In another study, it was reported that interaction with a trained animal during a session of therapy reduced anxiety in psychiatric inpatients.⁴ Finally, a study involving 40 childhood sexual abuse survivors engaged in therapy at five different outpatient sites, found that pets played a strong supportive role for the survivors when they were being abused.⁵ The participants were asked to draw Family Life Space Diagrams, and pets were often rated significantly more supportive and closer to the survivor than other humans in a household unit.⁶

Overall, the mere presence of friendly animals, from dogs and cats, to more exotic animals such as turtles, rabbits, horses, and fish, can provide health benefits to humans and offer a pleasant external focus. Interaction with companion animals promotes safe feelings and provides a source of contact comfort, which can decrease anxiety and sympathetic nervous system arousal. Specific physiological benefits include decreasing heart rate and blood pressure, as mentioned above, as well as increasing mental clarity and alleviating depression.⁷

Programs at Child Advocacy Centers

In the realm of child protection, the benefits of

animal assistance can help children, particularly at a child advocacy center (CAC) where a child may be present for therapy, a medical exam, or a forensic interview. Animal greeters at a CAC may help a child entering the forensic interview process to be calmer, more comfortable and secure, thus increasing the accuracy of reports. The child may be more willing to give embarrassing or difficult details of abuse if a companion animal is present. For example, children have been known to recount incidents of abuse into the ear of a companion animal while an interviewer nearby listens to details. These are similar benefits to those found in therapy sessions with pets, and the nonjudgmental comfort the animal provides is beneficial to both the child and the interviewer.

There are already examples of child advocacy centers incorporating animal assistance in day to day operations. The Johnson County Children's Advocacy Center in Cleburne, Texas, has a well-established animal assistance program using dogs that are trained, certified, and handled by volunteers. The dogs act as official greeters for children entering the center for the first time. They are also a part of the counseling and play therapy sessions and sometimes stay with a child during forensic interviews. Local judges have given permission for the dogs to enter the courtroom with a child witness, much like that of a “comfort item.”⁸ The center's Web site declares that “the dogs are doing an amazing job helping to soothe the children. There is always anxiety that goes with telling their traumatic stories. These very special dogs seem to respond effortlessly to each child's needs.”⁹ The executive director of the Johnson County CAC, Tammy King, advises those who are interested in starting such a program to get local kennel clubs involved and find a volunteer to teach obedience and help owners learn to work with their dogs. Ms. King states that once this happens, “there is nothing they can't do.”

“Pawz for Kids” is another program based at the Midland Rape Crisis and Child Advocacy Center in Midland, Texas.¹⁰ The dogs in this program do not attend court or enter the interview rooms, but greet the children in the waiting area and are incorporated into therapy sessions. Many dogs that are present in therapy sessions belong to the therapists and are also certified. The therapists report that the children talk more freely while petting the dogs and that the dogs help with their sense of safety. The Children's Advocacy Center Program director, Andra

Chamberlin, reports that “an unexpected bonus was the staff’s reaction to having the dogs at the agency. It has helped with stress and tension as we interact with the dogs as well.”

The program in Midland makes a large impact and was inexpensive to start and maintain. With a volunteer staff of nearly 30 dogs and handlers, each dog is trained and certified through Therapy Dogs International, Inc.¹¹ Each dog is insured for one million dollars and the yearly fee for insurance is only \$25 per dog. Usually the volunteer handlers pay this fee. The handlers introduce the dog, show tricks, and have the child feed, walk, and pet the dog. The staff believes that the dogs calm the children both before and after interviews, and often the children look for a specific dog to be waiting for them. In addition, the center has found that it is very rare that a child is so afraid of dogs that a dog must leave. When children leave the center, they are given a business card size picture of the dog with the dog’s name on it.

The Mississippi Children’s Advocacy Center in Jackson, Mississippi, is another CAC that has utilized animal assistance. The center first had a German Shepard named Vachss through the early 1990s. This German shepard was one of the first of his kind to work as a “therapy dog” at a CAC and actually accompany children to court, with much success. After Vachss, the center had a cat named Pookie to greet the children as they arrived. The director, Catherine Dixon, felt that Pookie helped to build rapport with the children who came in.¹² Pookie’s presence alone established a calmer and happier environment at the CAC.

Starting a Program

Getting a therapy pet program started at a community CAC involves finding certified and insured pets and their handlers. Reaching out to other CACs, local animal advocacy groups, or to national organizations, is a good way to start. For example, certification for dogs can be obtained for very little money through organizations that regulate pet-assisted therapy and pet-assisted activity such as Therapy Dogs International and Delta Society.¹³ The certification process for dogs involves obedience training, temperament testing, and insurance. Handlers, of course, can be volunteers who have had background checks and are recruited through a volunteer coordinator or a pet-assisted therapy group. Finally, speaking with local prosecutors and judges can provide a better idea of whether animals can also accompany a child during forensic interviews, and even to court, in a specific jurisdiction.

Animal assistance at a child advocacy center can greatly contribute to fulfilling the goal of helping children who have been victims of crime. The benefits of animal assistance can leave a lasting impact that affects the process from intake to conviction, and help a child start on the road to recovery. Ultimately, for every child who interviews and testifies with more confidence, the efforts made are repaid tenfold.

Phillips, director of Government Affairs for the American Humane Association, for their support and assistance with this research.

- ² This quote can be found at http://www.quotemountain.com/quotes/animal_quotes/.
- ³ Sunny Lynn Nagengast, et al, *The Effects of the Presence of a Companion Animal on Physiological Arousal and Behavioral Distress in Children During a Physical Examination*, 12 JOURNAL OF PEDIATRIC NURSING 323, 328-329 (1997).
- ⁴ Sandra B. Barker & Kathryn S. Dawson, *The Effects of Animal-Assisted Therapy on Anxiety Ratings of Hospitalized Psychiatric Patients*, 49 PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES 797 (1998).
- ⁵ Sandra B. Barker, et al, *The Use of the Family Life Space Diagram in Establishing Interconnectedness: A Preliminary Study of Sexual Abuse Survivors, Their Significant Others, and Pets*, 53(4) INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY 435, 440 (1997).
- ⁶ *Id.* at 440.
- ⁷ Erika Friedmann, *The Role of Pets in Enhancing Human Well-Being: Physiological Effects*, in THE WALTHAM BOOK OF HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTIONS: BENEFITS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF PET OWNERSHIP (I. Robinson, ed., Great Britain: BPC Wheatons, LTD, Exeter, 1995). See also Delta Society, *Healthy Reasons to Have a Pet* (visited February 2007) available at <http://www.deltasociety.org/AnimalsHealthGeneralReasons.htm>. This Web site lists many resources and studies supporting the health benefits of being around companion animals.
- ⁸ Rena Marie Justice, *Animal Assistance Part II: Dogs in the Courtroom: The New Comfort Item (Part II of two)*, APRI’s UPDATE (forthcoming 2007).
- ⁹ For more information on the Johnson County Children’s Advocacy Center and the Therapy Dogs program, see <http://www.childadvocacycenter-jc.org>.
- ¹⁰ For more information on the Midland Rape Crisis and Child Advocacy Center and the Pawz for Kids program, see <http://www.mrccac.org>.
- ¹¹ For more information on Therapy Dogs International, see <http://www.tdi-dog.org/>.
- ¹² Allie Phillips, *The Dynamics Between Animal Abuse, Domestic Violence and Child Abuse: How Pets Can Help Abused Children*, 38(5) The Prosecutor 22, 27 (2004).
- ¹³ For more information on Delta Society, see <http://www.deltasociety.org/>.

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