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HOPE & HEALING THROUGH ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY

USING CHILDREN'S LOVE OF
ANIMALS TO HELP THEM
OVERCOME A HISTORY OF TRAUMA





Amelia was clearly struggling in therapy. She resisted the coping skills that she desperately needed. She experienced multiple meltdowns, tantrums and other negative behaviors whenever she was stressed out. Amelia emphatically told her foster parents, her therapist and **everyone else who would listen that she hated therapy and that it just didn't help. ...**

Whenever it was time for her next session, Amelia repeatedly asked: “Why do I have to go?”

As it turned out, Amelia’s therapist was the one to suggest equine therapy (working with horses). This time, something clicked. Amelia’s love for the horse was readily apparent, as was her steadily improving coping and emotional regulation skills. Her ability to tolerate stress also blossomed, resulting in decreased outbursts.

By building an ongoing relationship with the horse, Amelia was able—for the first time ever—to explore her fears, struggles, strengths and challenges. She began to understand her social and emotional needs and how to express them to her foster parents. She grasped the meaning of trust as she shared her fears, secrets, hurts, pains and joys with a horse.

Equine therapy helped Amelia learn how to engage in relationships with others, how to regulate her stress and emotions, and how to ask for what she needs. She is now able to accept and initiate touch from others as she experienced the value of connecting with a horse.

Amelia is a prime example of a child who didn’t respond well to traditional “talk therapy.” She needed something different. Animal therapy helped Amelia learn to nurture, trust and touch. While she continues to work on her relationship skills, Amelia is well on her way to building positive, healing connections.

UNLOCKING YOUR CHILD’S HEART

Maybe you’ve never considered the introduction of an animal into your child’s life, but perhaps it’s time to change your thinking. For many children, a love affair with animals begins early in life, with bedtime stories and popular tales about a big red dog, a tiger that bounces and bears that go to school and even display manners. Stuffed animals soothe our children’s “boo-boos,” calm their fears and help ease nighttime terrors. Teddy bears and the like are an invitation to relax and feel safe, to drift off to sleep. How many children would turn down a visit to the zoo, petting a dog that licks their face and watching cartoons or animated movies that feature animals as the stars of the show?

Animals play a significant role in children’s emotional and social development. For the child who is reluctant to talk to adults, an animal can be a great listener. Horses, for example, bear silent witness to that which can’t be spoken, opening the door for children to share their hurts, maybe for the first time. **Indeed, horses are gifted with an innate, subtle and nuanced ability to connect with and help a child feel safe.**

Perhaps you have a child who displays challenging behaviors. Or your child may be experiencing difficulty with touch, eating or sounds. It seems as though you’ve tried everything to help him or her, but nothing seems to work. Animal-assisted therapy might be the key to unlock your child’s heart and begin the healing journey. Much like art, music or dance therapy, animal-assisted therapy engages children through their senses, rather than through words.



MUCH LIKE ART, MUSIC OR
DANCE THERAPY, **ANIMAL-
ASSISTED THERAPY ENGAGES
CHILDREN THROUGH THEIR
SENSES**, RATHER THAN
THROUGH WORDS.

THE BENEFITS OF ANIMAL THERAPY

Needless to say, the potential benefits of animal therapy for children in foster care are significant:

- Animals provide comfort
- Animals offer unconditional acceptance and attention
- Animals foster attachment
- Animals help improve the child's capacity for empathy
- Animals provide opportunities for the child to practice social skills without judgment
- Animals help create a sense of safety for the child, which in turn decreases the child's sense of fear
- Animals provide opportunities for the child to receive affection and learn healthy touch
- Animals promote physical activity for the child, such as running, walking, petting or grooming
- Animals can serve as a safe confidante
- Animals encourage playful interaction

Suppose your child is acting out, difficult to calm or shut down or simply not connecting with you. You're concerned that your child isn't getting better. Perhaps it is time to talk to your child's therapist about introducing an animal into your child's life. Only a trained professional should engage in animal-assisted therapy with your child, but common, everyday interactions with animals can also play a role in a child's development and healing.

Even an ordinary family pet can help break through a child's resistance, pain and fears. A hurting child will often share secrets with a family pet, nurture that pet and protect that pet. In turn, pets help children to co-regulate (which means that your child learns to calm to the animal's level). A strong relationship between animal and child creates a bond that leads to healing in the child's heart.

“THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF ANIMALS ON OUR KIDS' LIVES CAN'T BE OVERSTATED. IN PARTICULAR, THE UNCONDITIONAL LOVE OF OUR DOGS HAS BEEN A HEALING BALM FOR THEIR HURTING HEARTS. HORSES HAVE ALSO PLAYED A CRITICAL ROLE WITH THE HEALING OF OUR DAUGHTER—THROUGH RELATIONSHIP, TRUST, MOVEMENT AND CONFIDENCE.”

— KELLY ROSATI

UNCONDITIONAL AFFECTION

Joey had a significant history of abuse and neglect. The 7-year-old found it hard to show or receive affection, and his foster parents knew they needed to try a new approach. They successfully petitioned to get Joey a dog, one specifically trained to help children with trauma histories.

While hesitant at first, Joey began by simply feeding and walking his dog. As their relationship grew, he started grooming his dog, and the dog responded with unconditional affection. The specially trained animal responded to the command “Enough,” so when Joey wanted the dog to stop licking or pawing him, he only needed to say that one word. Having this degree of control helped Joey feel safe and secure, and his heart began to open up to touch. **Thanks to the dog’s influence, Joey was gradually able to open up to his foster parents’ touch, love and affection.**

“ANIMALS ARE CAPABLE OF STIRRING THE DEPTHS OF OUR EMOTIONS TO RESPOND AND POSSIBLY TRUST ONCE AGAIN. **THEY CAN HELP GAIN MOMENTUM AND INSIGHT INTO HEALING WHAT HAS BEEN HURT.**”

— DANIEL HUERTA, *THERAPEUTIC COUNSELOR*

CONNECTION AND COMFORT

Children in foster care typically come to your home with their emotional buckets empty. Now you, as their new foster parents, want nothing more than to fill their buckets with loving-kindness. Yet in response to your best efforts, these children often behave in ways that make absolutely no sense to you. Instead of getting better, they seem to act out more and more, and in ways you can’t understand.

Eight-year-old Mandy entered foster care at age 4 after experiencing domestic violence and sexual abuse in her birth home. She began acting out not long after placement in a foster home. Mandy wouldn’t take showers, wouldn’t respond to simple requests from her foster parents and had trouble sleeping. Her therapist recommended Mandy spend time with an animal. Her foster parents lived on a farm and welcomed this idea. The family cat seemed drawn to Mandy and thus provided the much-needed connection that Mandy needed.

Mandy took the cat everywhere she went that summer. The cat would wait in the bathroom while Mandy took a bath (showers were still too scary for her), and the cat’s purring, warmth and softness helped lull Mandy to sleep each night. When school began, her therapist worked with the administration to help ease Mandy’s transition. She took pictures of her cat with her to school, she kept a soft stuffed cat in her desk, and her teacher encouraged Mandy to pet the stuffed animal when she became stressed. Her schoolwork improved as she learned to manage her emotions and stress during the school day.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Various animals throughout history provide examples of personality traits. We associate a donkey with being stubborn, a lion with bravery and a mouse with timidity. Sheep can recognize individual faces and remember them for years. They can also differentiate emotional states through facial characteristics.

Some animals can demonstrate a similar sensitivity to the needs of your child. Karen Hawkins, a former foster parent who operates a wildlife rehabilitation farm in Maine, says, "Some of my foster children had little or no nurturing when they were young. Having them help me nurture orphaned wildlife gave them some personal experiences of how nurturing should have been for them. I saw angry, sullen and sometimes downright vicious children—usually teens but sometimes younger—slowly become softer and milder in their behaviors. They began to trust more."

“ THEY LEARNED TO CONFIDE THEIR SECRETS TO THE ANIMALS AND EVENTUALLY THAT MADE IT EASIER FOR THEM TO BEGIN TO TRUST ME ENOUGH TO CONFIDE IN ME.”

While you want to be your child's primary source of comfort and love, your child might not be ready to trust or receive that comfort.

In many cases, an animal might be able to provide the emotional support your child needs.

When children “hold in” their stresses, fears and hurts, they often tend to act out through lying, raging, stealing or simply shutting down. When a child acts out, parents tend to react out of stress trying to force compliance or cooperation. An acting-out child can also be intimidating, because we don't know how to respond or we are afraid that others will think we are incompetent as parents.

When children are able to relieve their emotional pressures, they learn to better regulate their moods and find a new sense of calm.

An animal can nurture those calm interactions, helping children learn how to regulate their emotions.

Developing a relationship with an animal gives children an increased sense of comfort. For example, petting a dog promotes relaxation, decreased blood pressure and stress, better morale and an improved outlook for the future. Calmness increases; fear and anxiety decrease.

DEVELOPING A
RELATIONSHIP WITH AN
ANIMAL GIVES CHILDREN
AN **INCREASED SENSE
OF COMFORT.**



EXCITING, ENERGETIC ... AND HAPPY

Children and teens who are paired with dogs demonstrate improved attentiveness and heightened joy. Adolescents describe their mood after their experience with dogs as exciting, energetic and happy. Feelings of depression decrease dramatically. Animal companionship stimulates the release of opioids, which are psychoactive chemicals that relieve pain and promote pleasurable feelings.

In addition to the emotional benefits of animal companionship, positive behavioral changes often take place. Adolescents learn to manage their behavior in an effort to keep from startling their pets. They learn to modulate their tone, touch and temperament to better respond to animals.

Interacting with pets can also teach adolescents responsibility and how to be part of a relationship.

WHERE TO BEGIN

If you're concerned that your child isn't healing and growing, talk to his or her caseworker, therapist, or other professionals about the option of animal-assisted therapy. **You are the strongest voice for your child's needs, so don't be afraid to speak up and ask for something nontraditional.**

Don't despair if you don't have access to animal-assisted therapy. As mentioned previously, an ordinary family pet with a calm demeanor can provide many of the same benefits. If you're unsure how to effectively introduce an animal into your child's life, consult a therapist or other professional. Some families have found success with goats or other small farm animals, seeking out 4-H clubs or similar programs that encourage and teach children about animals.

For more information, see the resources listed at the end of this booklet.

“ I WAS REALLY AFRAID OF THE HORSE AT FIRST; HE WAS SO BIG. I WAS TAUGHT TO FEED AND GROOM HIM. I DIDN'T GET TO RIDE HIM, BUT THAT'S OK BECAUSE I REALLY GOT TO KNOW HIM, AND I THINK HE TRUSTS ME. I KNOW I TRUST HIM A LOT. ... I CAN'T WAIT TO RIDE HIM ONE DAY. **I LIKE TO BRUSH HIM AND TALK TO HIM. HE LISTENS TO ME AND I KNOW HE UNDERSTANDS.** ”

— DANIELLE



A BRIDGE TO HEALING

Remember Amelia? As she continues to work on regulating her emotions, equine therapy has helped her connect with others more consistently and in meaningful ways.

Joey's foster parents adopted him, and today he is a very active boy who is able to give and receive affection. While he is still very connected to his loyal dog, Joey's ability to connect with others is also clearly evident.

Mandy still loves her cat, yet her dependence has decreased as she learns other ways to soothe and manage her emotions. Mandy's foster parents remain committed to her progress and to demonstrating God's unwavering love for her.

For these children, animals became the bridge, taking them from distress, disconnection and discouragement to a place of connection, restoration and healing.

Resources:

Pet Partners: petpartners.org

The National Children's Advocacy Center: nationalcac.org

National Children's Alliance: nationalchildrensalliance.org

Therapy Dogs International: tdi-dog.org





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