



## Talk to the Animals

On a farm just west of the Twin Cities, animals and counselors work together to build trust with troubled kids and help them recover from abuse, neglect, and violence. It's part of a growing trend throughout the country to integrate horses, dogs, cats, sheep, chickens, pigs, and even reptiles into therapeutic practice.

By Emily Sohn



There's no definitive explanation for why animals are so good at soothing people and motivating them to talk and work. There might be something deeply primal going on, suggests R. K. Anderson. "The sounds of howling coyotes, roaring lions, and crying wolves send shivers up our spine," he says. "We still have a part of our brain that is very primitive."

**It's hard to get** much information out of Dominique Johnson. The 17-year-old is lean, athletic, and baby-face handsome, but his gaze bores into the ground beneath his feet. His hunched shoulders graze his ears. The hood of his sweatshirt covers his head and hides the sides of his dark-skinned face. Dom responds to questions about himself, but his answers are short, and his voice is barely loud enough to hear.

Where does he live? St. Louis Park.

Does he have any pets? Two dogs. Three cats.

When social worker Kay Neznik asks Dom if he's had abuse in his life, he nods. "Neglect?" she asks softly. He nods again. He's adopted now, though, so things are better. Still, getting more than a word or two out of him at a time seems impossible. Until he gets near a Norwegian Fjord horse named Viola.

"She's calm and laid-back," Dom says, gently petting a flank of the 900-pound creature that he first met two years ago. They're standing in the middle of a pasture near Minnetrista. "She's stubborn a lot when you ride her," Dom adds. "When you lead her, you need to keep her away from food. She doesn't like people to touch her feet." As the young man talks, his back straightens. His chin lifts. For the first time, he looks straight into the eyes of the adults with him. "She's fun to be around," he says. The tan horse stands quietly by his side.

To Dom, Viola is more than an animal or even a friend. She's a therapist. The horse lives on an animal-assisted therapy (AAT) farm run by a nonprofit organization called Minnesota Linking Individuals, Nature, and Critters, Inc. (MN LINC). Staffed by psychologists and social workers, and populated by dogs, horses, and chickens, MN LINC's 30-acre spread is a haven for kids and adults with emotional issues, behavioral problems, and histories of trauma and abuse.

AAT is a growing field, and MN LINC is one of its pioneers. Instead of talking with their clients in quiet rooms, MN LINC staff members work with animal "colleagues" to facilitate self-growth. And while data is scarce for the strategy's effectiveness, anecdotal evidence is so striking that experts who incorporate AAT into their practice firmly believe that animals can help nurture compassion, communication, self-control, self-esteem, patience, and more, in ways that traditional talk therapy can't.

"Kids will say, 'I'm not going to see a therapist, but I'll go for a walk with the dog lady,'" says Molly DePrekel, a licensed psychologist and clinical director of MN LINC. Having animals around is usually enough of an icebreaker to open them up, she says. "When people are around animals, they start to talk about their pasts."

### Boon Companions

The idea of using animals to facilitate therapy was first proposed by Canadian child psychologist Boris Levinson in the early 1960s. Levinson had brought his dog into several sessions with his young patients and found that the hound served as a communication link, giving children an increased sense of security and quickening the therapy process. He published his research in an article titled "The Dog as Co-Therapist" that appeared in *Mental Hygiene* in 1962.

AAT didn't gain much traction among practicing therapists until the 1970s, however, says R. K. Anderson,

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veterinarian, animal behaviorist, retired public health professor, and director of the Center to Study Human Animal Relationships and Environments (CENSHARE) at the University of Minnesota. Until the middle of the 20th century, a household's decision to keep animals was largely a practical one: horses helped farmers with their work, dogs herded sheep and cattle, and cats cleared buildings of unwanted mice. Only in the 1970s did pet ownership become widespread in America. The boom happened fast, though. In 1975, a survey of pet lovers at the Minnesota State Fair revealed that 70 percent of respondents had pets that slept in their beds or bedrooms. Anderson believes that today's figure is closer to 85 percent.

Humans' affection for creatures great and small was already apparent to people who worked with the elderly, however. An informal survey of nursing homes in Minnesota in the mid-1970s found that about half were allowing animals in to visit with residents on a regular basis. Elderly people loved the companionship, but the practice was illegal. So CENSHARE and several other groups lobbied the Legislature to pass a law that allowed pets in nursing homes. It found support, and today, animals are generally welcome in residential facilities for the elderly and major hospitals—not only in Minnesota, but throughout the country.

Over the years, studies have shown that simply interacting with animals can improve quality of life for cardiac patients, prison inmates, hospitalized psychiatric patients, and the elderly, among other groups. In many situations, human contact with animals lowers blood pressure and reduces stress, pain, and anxiety. Animals can enhance physical health, as well, by motivating people to do physical therapy, says Carol Ouhl, a dog trainer, instructor, and animal-therapy-curriculum writer in Cottage Grove. When there's an animal involved, Ouhl says, "we find people come to therapy more regularly. We either get better results or we get results faster." And horseback riding can help handicapped people improve muscle tone, balance, and posture.

Working with animals to help treat mental illnesses and behavioral problems is a much more recent practice. Because AAT is so new, practitioners are still developing uniform standards, methods, definitions, and outcome measurement tools. Nonetheless, seminars on AAT, offered by MN LINC, CENSHARE, and other organizations nationwide, have begun to draw increasing interest from social workers, psychologists, nurses, occupational therapists, and even motivational business speakers. No academic degrees or official certifications are yet available in the fledgling field, though. And even among proponents, there are multiple, conflicting theories about how best to integrate AAT with conventional therapy practices.

For now, AAT remains a science of examples. "There is a lot of storytelling in this field," DePrekel says. There are stories about victims of sexual abuse who refuse to talk at school but who open up when they work with animals. There are rowdy troublemakers who miraculously cooperate when horses are around. There are parents who say their kids suddenly take more risks or talk about their feelings after petting a sheep, cradling a piglet, or stroking a lizard. And there is the Minnesota judge who recently ordered equine therapy for a girl who had been sexually abused because spending time with horses helped her so much. The stories are powerful, and they are accumulating. Even the federal government has taken notice: last January, the National Institutes of Health launched a study examining the effectiveness of AAT in reducing oncology patients' pain.

### Stable Conditions

Though located just 25 miles west of the Twin Cities, MN LINC's Game Farm Stables seems worlds away from the chaos of urban life. Horses graze in roomy pens. Tail-wagging dogs sit when told. Chickens squawk and cluck and move toward fingers that tap the ground near them. On a late-September morning, a chilly wind blows, and a group of a dozen or so bundled-up teenagers, teachers, and social workers tour the grounds with MN LINC staff.

The kids in this group come from District 287, an alternative school system in Hennepin County for students who require a different approach than traditional schools can offer, accommodating learning difficulties and behavioral or emotional problems. Many of them have been abused. Many have suffered loss or trauma. "They're trying to be square pegs in round holes in a school system that doesn't accommodate square pegs," says Tanya Welsch, a social worker and administrator at MN LINC.

Here, Welsch says, the kids get to be outside. They learn by doing. And unlike most therapy situations, their interactions give them a chance to talk without feeling confined or judged. Animals, after all, can't ask them questions about their painful pasts. "These kids are used to overt, in-your-face, tell-me-how-you-feel therapy," Welsch says, and they hate it. "They say, 'I'll tell you how I feel. F—k you!'"

The AAT approach is more subtle. When DePrekel introduces the group to the female horses, she calls Ellie the "herd mare," or the matriarch. She tells the kids to watch the horses' ears. "They're like your mom's eyebrows," she says. They tell you a lot about how the animals are feeling. Near the male horse pen, DePrekel points out a big horse named Hero and urges the kids to watch how other horses react to him. When Hero approaches the fence and lowers his head, the others get out of his way. Seventy percent of communication is body language, she observes aloud, and learning how to read those cues is an important way to connect with other people.

Over the next 12 weeks, during biweekly, two-hour-long sessions, the kids will gradually interact more and more with the horses. Some kids, like Dom, come year after year. They start by touching the horses. Then, over the course of their visits, they enter the animal pens. They groom the horses. They learn to relax the animals with a soothing type of bodywork called Tellington Touch, or T-touch. And finally, they ride as a team, with leaders and side-walkers, with a saddle and without. In the process, DePrekel says, the kids learn

how to get out of their heads and into their bodies. Horses can tell right away if you are uncomfortable or scared, she says, and they'll mirror those emotions back at you. The only way to get close to one is to be calm and confident and to send clear messages about where you are and what you're going to do. There is one horse at the farm that actually follows people without a lead rope if she feels comfortable with them.

"Horses rely heavily on body language," DePrekel says. "Their eyes are on the sides of their heads. They are really aware of their environment and really vigilant. They live with the feeling, 'If I'm scared, I'm going to run.' People who have had trauma can relate to that really well."

### Primal Instinct

Once kids recognize how much they have in common with animals, trained therapists can get them talking about themselves in indirect ways. DePrekel is currently working with horses to help survivors of sexual abuse establish limits with others regarding acceptable behaviors. First she teaches them when it's okay to stare at or approach a horse. Then they start talking about how to set their own boundaries.

Horses aren't the only animals that can bring people out of their shells, Neznik says. She has been working for more than a year with an 11-year-old boy in foster care who comes from a family with a history of incest. At first, talking about the abuse made the boy so anxious, he couldn't sit still. Then he mentioned that he missed his cats, and Neznik had an idea. She took her young patient to Feline Rescue, a shelter for abused and abandoned cats in St. Paul.

The boy loved to pet the cute, furry animals, and cat sessions quickly became a weekly ritual for him. He learned that cats would only come to him if he calmed down, so he taught himself how to relax. Now he talks with his social worker while petting cats, usually a different one every week, brought in by a volunteer. He even teaches other kids in Neznik's practice how to do what they call "cat calm."

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For people like Jean del Santo, the human-animal bond has a spiritual element. "The word *animal* comes from the Latin *animus*, which means 'spirit,'" says del Santo, a U of M music professor and a cancer survivor. During three years of intense treatment for leukemia, del Santo visited her horse Calypso every time her white blood cell count was high enough to make it possible. Just seeing him made her feel grounded, she says. "When you're around an animal as large and powerful as a horse, you have to be totally present at all times," she says. "I remember going up and just feeling this incredible energy force. It was almost overwhelming, I was in such a weakened state."

The biggest challenge for the field of AAT at this point is to find a way to help people take home the lessons they learn from animals that can't go home with them. To that end, every visit to MN LINC ends with a ritual called the "closure circle." The group sits in a circle, and everyone takes a turn rating their day on a scale from 1 to 5 and sharing something they learned and enjoyed. Dom gives the day a 3, because it was a little cold.

As the group reflects, the horses go back to grazing. The chickens peck at their seeds. The dogs lie down to nap. Life at the farm goes on at its own pace, determined by the rhythm of eating, sleeping, and breathing. Everyone, somehow, seems more content. **MM**

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