

# Pets Soothe Children's Negative Emotions

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GLENMOORE (Chester Co.) — Feeling angry? Depressed? Frustrated?

Cuddle up to a bunny. Or a goat. Even an iguana running up and down your arm is thought to ease stress, calm nerves, and give you that feeling of well being.

That's what a pilot program has discovered at Devereux, a school for troubled youth.

"It's amazing the difference a pet can make in the life of these kids," said Roy Erdman, who teaches at the Devereux's Brandywine Center that houses about 100 boys between the ages of 7 and 16, who mostly have been diagnosed with emotional and developmental disabilities.

The program is referred to as pet facilitated therapy, but for centuries parents have known that a dog or cat in a child's life can be a calming influence when facing life's tough battles.

From the school's beginning, the founder, Helena Devereux, planned that a dog should always be kept as a house pet.

But government policies on cleanliness intervened. It seemed easier to get rid of the dog than to clean up the mud and shedding hair that a dog might track in the house or the flea bites a child might contract.

So for years, no dog or other animal crossed the threshold of Devereux grounds.

That all changed three years ago when Roy Erdman, outdoor education specialist, instigated the pet therapy program.

Erdman now has a small-scale zoo set up on the grounds that cover 350 acres.

Skeptical professionals are now convinced that pets indeed have a positive effect on the children.

Erdman said, "The behavioral difference between the boys at the zoo compared to elsewhere is like day and night. Kids just do better around animals. Animals are a calming influence and help children interact."

Ideally, the hope is that children will transfer their ability to care for animals and maintain self-control to their interaction with humans.

So far, the study does show that the children working with the ani-

mals have less emotional crises. The therapy can also be used as crisis management in allowing kids who are having a bad day to come to the center and interact with the animals.

Children involved in pet therapy adopt an animal of their own. They can choose either from the offspring of animals on the grounds or from a pet store. But before they do so, they must learn about the animal by studying a skill card that explains the care and characteristics of the animal.

It is that child's responsibility to care for the pet, and when released from the school, the child takes the pet along home if the parents approve.

The children also participate in local projects by taking animals to nursing homes or participating in show and tell with students not involved in pet therapy.

Quails and doves are popular projects. Recently, the students hatched four quail in an incubator. Not only do the birds make interesting pets, but by watching, children learn how doves make soft nests from feathers and hear the cooing sounds of a contented bird.

"Did you know this interesting fact?" Louis, a student, asked a visitor at the center recently. "When you see birds sitting on a wire and their bellies are puffed out — that is really a pocket of air that forms under their feathers to keep them warm."

Ed was eager to show how a chinchilla takes a dust bath to clean its fur. The dust is a mixture of sand and talcum powder, and Ed sees that the chinchilla has a dust bath weekly.

As one student trimmed the toenails of his rabbit, he explained that the proper way to pick up the rabbit is by its skin on the back of its neck.

"Whiskers are important to rabbits," he said. "It helps them to smell better. Some people trim their rabbit's whiskers, but I don't recommend it," he said.

The student said that he and some of his friends experimented by putting rabbits and guinea pigs in the same cage and found that they will groom each other.

A pet cemetery is located on the grounds where children bury animals that die and the students learn to deal with grief as a natural process of life.

When students report to the class, they must first do chores such as changing water, emptying feeders, and filling with fresh feed before spending individual time with an animal of their choice.

Erdman has nothing but praise for the program. Initial fears that some children might mistreat the animals since cruelty to animals can be a sign of emotional illness have been unfounded.

"We started the program as a demonstration to prove its worth. Now, after three years, it has proved its success and we are expanding the program to other campuses," Erdman said.

The Devereux School was founded by Helena Devereux, a pioneer in the field of special education, and now has campuses in 13 states. It is considered the largest not-for-profit provider of mental health and developmental disability treatment program in the U.S. Sylvester Stallone was one of its graduates.

Specialized treatment is available for children, adolescents, adults, and families. For more information about the program, call (215) 942-5900.



Les sits patiently while a dove crawls on his shoulders. Even children with attention deficit disorders, display remarkable patience and calmness when spending time at the zoo.



It's toe nail trimming time for this rabbit. Students who participate in the pet therapy program must first learn the pet's requirements for housing, feeding, and handling.



This quail is a bit tamer than those in the wild and allows students to observe it closely.



While an iguana crawls up his arm, Roy Erdman talks to students about the need to be careful that the iguana's fragile tail is not broken. Erdman said, "The behavioral difference between the boys at the zoo compared to elsewhere is like day and night. Kids just do better around animals. Animals are a calming influence and help children interact."



After Ed gives his chinchilla a dust bath, the pair spend time together.



A dove rests momentarily on Les's fingers before taking a flight around the room.