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**PLAY THERAPY WITH
KIDS & CANINES:
Benefits for Children's
Developmental and
Psychosocial Health**

Risë VanFleet



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PREFACE

I have not been alone in writing this book. The acknowledgments include some of the many human colleagues, friends, and family members who helped generously. But these people were not the only ones who contributed to the completion of the manuscript. Nearly all of it was written with four dogs – three Beagles and a Border Collie mix you will meet later in this book – at my feet and by my side. When I moved from my desk to my library to consult reference materials, four canines moved with me. When I returned to the keyboard, they wandered back to their sleeping spots nearby. My writing was interspersed with no fewer than 500 ball games, a small price to pay for the inspiration and companionship that these dogs gave me. Although the two cats showed considerably less interest in my creative process, they nevertheless provided entertainment and comic relief when they did appear.

I know that my interest in this topic arises from personal experiences with pets and animals I have encountered throughout my life. From Ivy, a cat that was with me for the first 19 years of my life, through an assortment of other family dogs and cats, to my current six animal companions, I have experienced our emotional interplay and attachment in ways that were enjoyable, touching, and just plain fun. While I recovered from donating a kidney to my brother over a decade ago, my pet dog at the time never left my side until I stopped moaning and groaning. She buffered my crankiness (I do not do well in the “patient” role) and provided a distraction.

As an amateur nature and wildlife photographer, I have had the unique opportunity to watch and photograph bears, sea otters, mountain goats, whales, birds, deer, elk, seals, and a whole host of other animals in the wild. A professional photographer from Switzerland I

encountered on a mountainside during my first trip to Alaska many years ago taught me that if I sat still and had patience, Dall sheep ewes and lambs high up in the rocky outcroppings would approach me. I was rewarded for a half hour of stillness (a new experience for me) by 10 ewes and lambs whose curiosity drew them within 8 feet of me. My photography and wilderness interests have also given me sideline seats at extraordinary scenes of polar bears and Alaskan coastal bears at play.

I have also been fortunate to be involved with working dogs performing some of their traditional roles although these experiences were mostly for my enjoyment rather than out of necessity. I have helped train German Shepherd dogs for law enforcement use, and I have participated with Border Collies herding sheep in Scotland and the United States. My deepest involvement has been while independently mushing teams of six Alaskan huskies through the interior Alaskan wilderness (with a more experienced guide up ahead to rescue me should I get into trouble), and it has been during these experiences that I have realized how much true teamwork is possible between humans and animals.

My experiences with domestic animals, working animals, farm animals, and wild animals have enriched my life and taught me things I really needed to learn, and it was fun learning it. Because of these connections and experiences with the natural world, I have always suspected that animals have much to offer the therapeutic process. We are, of course, animals ourselves, but we have become estranged from the beautiful world around us. Learning and playing with our companion animals helps us grow and feel part of the larger environment.

Some still argue that animals do not have feelings and cannot really attach to us, but neuroscience, biology, veterinary science, medicine, and psychosocial research are showing this view to be incorrect. While people do sometimes project their own feelings and motives onto animals excessively, it is fast becoming clear that animals do have emotions and socially bonded relationships, and they are quite capable of interacting with us on those dimensions.

I once met an Alaskan brown bear while hiking alone through a thickly wooded area. I had been making noise in case of such an encounter, and my voice startled her. She was just coming out of the woods onto the trail, and we were only 15 feet apart. She had a cub behind

her. She huffed at me, and I immediately averted my eyes, knowing that direct eye contact was a sign of aggression and that her huffing was a sign of her anxiety. I talked softly to her and walked slowly away, watching her with my peripheral vision. She came out of the woods, stood face to face with her cub, and swung her head periodically in my direction until I was 100 yards away. She then turned and walked in the opposite direction with her cub behind her. I realized that we had both experienced the same feeling – anxiety – in the unexpected encounter. Neither of us felt safe at that moment, and she was focused on ensuring that her cub did not tangle with this intruder. We both read each other's intentions as best we could, and although there were some tense moments, we eventually understood that there was no threat and went our separate ways. For me, this encounter illustrated the commonality of our basic emotions with other species, and the ways that our ability to read and understand each other's signaled intentions ensured our own well-being. Later I saw this same sow playing with her cub for an hour in the waters of the lake and wondered if she felt the same simple pleasures that I feel when playing with my grandchildren.

This monograph starts with a story about my play therapy dog and her ability to connect with other species through play, followed by a rationale for the use of animals, and particularly dogs, in play therapy. A great deal of fascinating and relevant information is available from interdisciplinary studies of the human-animal bond, neuroscience and animal emotions, and animal play. Due to space limitations, only an overview of this information is included here, but key references are provided and are well worth reading. The monograph briefly summarizes the fields of animal-assisted therapy and play therapy and includes excellent resources for further exploration of these fields. There is no intention to duplicate information that is available in the other resources cited. The bulk of the monograph describes the rationale, guiding principles, practical ideas and methods, and the potential benefits for integrating play therapy and animal-assisted therapy, with a focus on the use of canines for a wide range of child problems.

Most of this monograph is written for child and family clinicians who wish to use their own dogs in their play therapy work. Sometimes therapy dog handlers who are not therapists work collaboratively with play therapists, and this material can easily be adapted to that approach as well. Proper training and full understanding of the fields of animal-

assisted therapy and play therapy are essential for the safety and well-being of the children, animals, and adults involved and for the quality of intervention.

Throughout the monograph, case examples are presented in smaller typeface and indented, and they are based on my experiences and those of other play therapists I know. Readers may not be able to use all of the suggestions, as dogs have different personalities and capabilities. The key is to develop interventions drawn from the unique characteristics, strengths, and needs of both the therapy dog and the child clients, and the cases provide examples of that. In all examples provided, identifying information has been changed to protect the privacy of children and families. At times, composites of several children or families are used, but the examples represent realistic descriptions of canines in play therapy.

The integration of play therapy and canine-assisted therapy is relatively new, and more developments can be expected in the near future. Certainly more research is needed. A handful of studies are underway, and more are planned. I am happy to discuss research ideas and methods with anyone interested in contributing to the field in this manner.

With all that said, I hope you find this work of interest and that it will facilitate dialog as theory, research, and practice in canine-assisted play therapy evolve.

Risë VanFleet
Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania
January, 2008

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	<i>iii</i>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	<i>v</i>
SERIES PREFACE	<i>vii</i>
PREFACE	<i>ix</i>
THE STORY OF A PLAY THERAPY DOG	1
ANIMAL EMOTIONS AND THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND	5
Animal Emotions	5
The Human-Animal Bond	7
Children's Relationship With Animals	8
ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY	9
The Usefulness of AAT	10
AAT Credentials	11
PLAY AND PLAY THERAPY	12
Animal Play	12
Human Play	14
Play Therapy	15
Research on Play Therapy	17
Play Therapy Credentials	18

INTEGRATION OF ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY AND PLAY THERAPY	18
Animal-Assisted Play Therapy/Pet Play Therapy	19
Exploratory Studies of Animals in Play Therapy	20
A Focus on Canines	21
“THE ORIGINAL PLAY THERAPISTS”: A CASE FOR CANINES	22
Why Dogs? A Case for Canines	22
CONSIDERATIONS FOR QUALITY, ETHICAL CANINE PLAY THERAPY PROGRAMS	28
Developmental Sensitivity	28
Clinical Grounding	28
Quality of Life	29
Competence	29
Relationship Orientation	29
Natural Processes	29
Playfulness	30
Safety	30
Generalization of Learning	30
Life Lessons	30
SELECTING AND TRAINING A PLAY THERAPY DOG	31
Selection of Play Therapy Dogs	31
General Considerations	31
Additional Considerations for Canines in Play Therapy	33
The Importance of Training	34
Socialization and Basic Training	36
Therapy Dog Training and Certification Programs	38
Play Therapy Training for Canine and Therapist	39
PRACTICAL MANAGEMENT	44
Options for Dog Handling	45
Consent	45

PRACTICAL MANAGEMENT (Cont'd)

Allergies and Zoonoses	46
Playroom Setup	46
Insurance	47
Risk Management	47
Knowledge of the Canine	48
Signs of Canine Stress	48
Amount of Work for the Canine	49
Degree of Canine Involvement	
Within the Child's Treatment Plan	49
Canines and Countertransference	50

THE FIRST MEETING:

PREPARATIONS AND INTRODUCTIONS

Is This Modality Appropriate for the Child and the Canine?	51
Child Preparation	52
Introducing Child and Dog	54

CANINE COTHERAPISTS

IN NONDIRECTIVE AND

DIRECTIVE PLAY THERAPY

Canines in Nondirective Play Therapy	56
Canines in Directive Play Therapy	59
Therapeutic Powers of Play	60
<i>Overcoming Resistance</i>	60
<i>Communication</i>	60
<i>Emotional Awareness and Regulation</i>	60
<i>Facilitation of Learning</i>	61
<i>Power and Control</i>	61
<i>Role Play and Behavioral Change</i>	61
<i>Stimulation of Development</i>	61
<i>Stress Management</i>	62
<i>Desensitization</i>	62
<i>Ego Control</i>	62
<i>Problem Solving</i>	62
<i>Mastery</i>	62
<i>Social Interaction and Relationship Enhancement</i>	63

ANXIETY REDUCTION	64
Fear of Dogs	64
Other Anxiety Problems	67
GRIEF AND LOSS	71
Grieving the Loss of a Human Family Member	72
Grieving the Loss of a Companion Animal	73
Grieving the Loss of a Therapy Dog	74
BUILDING COMPETENCE AND CONFIDENCE	75
Helping Children Learn About Canine “Language”	75
Teaching Children How to Obedience Train a Dog	76
<i>Description</i>	76
<i>Modeling</i>	76
<i>Skill Practice</i>	76
Playing Ball	78
Agility Training	79
Teaching the Canine New Tricks	79
WEIGHT REDUCTION AND FITNESS	81
Walking the Dog	81
Canine Agility Training	83
Fitness	84
ATTACHMENT AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING: CANINE APPLICATIONS FOR MALTREATED AND TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN	85
This Dog Is Just Like Me!	86
Acceptance: Canine-Style	87
Safe Boundaries	89
First Things First: “Look!”	90
Helping to Train the Dog	92
Healthy Touch: Grooming, Massage, and Caring for a Dog	92
Empathy “Exercises”	94
The Doggie Hotline	96
Self-Protection and Self-Regulation	97
Transitions: Canine Therapeutic Letter Writing and Storytelling	99

ATTENTIONALAND BEHAVIORAL DIFFICULTIES	101
Children With Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder	101
<i>Running With the Dogs</i>	101
<i>Slow Motion</i>	102
Children With Behavior Problems	103
COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL ANXIETIES	106
Speech and Language Development	107
Shyness and Stuttering	108
Other Communication and Social Difficulties	110
Canine Reading Programs	112
Doggie Dress-Up	112
Canine-Assisted Social Skills Groups	114
FAMILIES AND THE FUTURE	115
Family Involvement	115
FINAL SUGGESTIONS	117
Into the Future: Research and Development of Canine-Assisted Play Therapy	118
APPENDICES	121
Appendix A: Sample Introductory Letter From a Play Therapy Dog to a Child	123
Appendix B: Sample Letter From Kirrie, A Play Therapy Dog to Play Therapists	125
REFERENCES	127

PLAY THERAPY WITH KIDS & CANINES:

Benefits for Children's Developmental and Psychosocial Health

THE STORY OF A PLAY THERAPY DOG

Tippy Cat was just 6 months old when he showed up on our property nearly starved to death. As we fed him, he came closer to the house and eventually moved into our mudroom on cold nights and during the winter. Our relationship with him was mostly functional. He would tolerate us as long as we took care of his basic survival needs. He would avoid physical contact, and he quickly ran away from other people. The extreme neglect from his early life seemed to interfere with his ability to bond with us. Even when another stray cat, Bart, decided to live with us, Tippy Cat tolerated him but avoided most interactions. Although he did not seem afraid of our two Beagle dogs, Tippy Cat had little to do with them. I jokingly told colleagues that Tippy had an attachment disorder.

After 6 years like this, Kirrie, a rescued mixed breed dog (Border Collie and Beagle), joined the family. She had the energy and persistence typical of Border Collies and the happy-go-lucky temperament of Beagles. She was exceptionally playful. One day, the usually quiet Tippy was heard yowling from a room adjacent to where I was working. I assumed that Kirrie was pestering him to play and prepared to go stop the dog. To my surprise, the scene yielded something quite unexpected. Kirrie was taking the play bow posture and then bouncing around the room. Tippy watched Kirrie for a while and then chased the dog,

eventually retreating to a safe place under a chair. The cat reached out a paw to swipe playfully at the dog, and the cycle was repeated. With Kirrie's persistent play invitations, Tippy Cat initiated the chasing play. I watched, photographed, and videotaped the play for about 20 minutes. This was the first I had ever seen Tippy Cat play.

Immediately thereafter, Tippy Cat jumped into Kirrie's chair and curled up to sleep. Kirrie, who outweighed the cat by at least 35 pounds, carefully stepped onto the chair and curled up behind the cat. The cat nuzzled the dog and they slept together in the "spoon position" for nearly half an hour. This play-then-nap-together cycle became a daily event for Kirrie and Tippy. Within 2 weeks, Tippy Cat was spending more time in our family room, playing with Kirrie, rubbing against people's legs, and eventually spending brief periods in our laps. Nearly 3 years later, Tippy Cat and Kirrie play together most days, and their play times are still followed by a nap together. Whenever I go outside to play ball with Kirrie, Tippy invariably appears within 5 minutes to watch the game. He watches everything that Kirrie does and frequently initiates expansive outdoor chase games with Kirrie at dusk.

As I watched this remarkable and sudden transformation of our reticent cat, I strongly suspected that the cross-species play had much to do with it. The play had seemed to facilitate an attachment – between the dog and the cat, and eventually between the cat and the humans in the family. It was then that I began to think more seriously about training and using Kirrie as a play therapy dog, and about the potential for such work with traumatized and attachment-disrupted children.

For 2 decades prior to this event, I had periodically used animals in a variety of ways in conjunction with play therapy. Of course, I had animal miniatures and puppets in my playroom since the start of my play therapy work. As an avid nature photographer specializing in Alaskan wildlife, I had some of my photographs of Alaskan brown bears, Dall sheep, and sea otters on the walls of my office and playroom. My inclusion of animals seemed natural enough, given children's great interest in them, but I had never used live animals for great lengths of time or in particularly systematic ways. In fact, I felt a bit sheepish about involving the animals, as somewhere in my professional development I had gotten the impression that this would be an inappropriate way to conduct therapy.

It was children's interest in my pets that prompted me to include the animals in the first place. I had an office and playroom that adjoined our house, and the pets were usually outdoors when I saw clients. On rainy days, however, the dogs were kept in the kitchen where they usually stayed quiet during play sessions or parent meetings. Children and adolescents frequently asked if they could meet the dogs. With their parents' permission and under my supervision, I let the children give cookies to the dogs, pet them, and even taught the children a few commands and tricks that the dogs knew. The children never failed to ask about the dogs or request a short playtime with the dogs once they had met them.

My black cat, Bart, became involved in a different way. He had been named for the marvelous children's therapy book about trauma, *Brave Bart* (Sheppard & Manikoff, 1998), mostly because he was completely black like the story's main character. His personality more resembled that of Bart Simpson, but I took his photograph sitting with the *Brave Bart* book, and we gave it to children and adolescents in our practice who had loved and benefited from the book. A 6-year-old girl asked to meet the Bart in the photo, and she often played with him while I met with her parents in an adjacent room where we could still watch the pair of them for safety purposes. The child had originally come with her parents for Filial Therapy sessions after she was traumatized by her father's military deployment immediately after the 9/11 attacks. Filial Therapy worked well to alleviate the family's distress, and they quickly shifted to home play sessions and discharge from therapy. Her parents told me later that when her father was deployed to dangerous regions of the world for a second time, she told them that she needed to "go see Bart again." Around the same time, a reticent and oppositional 18-year-old girl who resented being referred to therapy by her parents, asked to hold Bart during a session. Bart, who is a very social cat, seemed delighted and curled up in her lap for the entire hour, purring contentedly and stretching as she petted him. The girl dropped nearly all of her defenses and began telling me her feelings about a number of difficult situations in her past and current life.

Until the playful relationship between Kirrie and Tippy Cat altered my thinking, I had only considered using animals as an adjunct to therapy – a brief transitional interlude as families were departing. After I had completed a considerable amount of training with Kirrie, I began

using her more systematically within play therapy sessions. I began reading more and attending seminars on the human-animal bond, animal play, aversive-free dog training, and animal-assisted therapy. Kirrie's first clients were foster children with long histories of challenging behaviors. Although the children typically did well with play therapy and Filial Therapy, their histories of abuse and neglect, coupled with frequent and unexpected moves within the foster care system, often made the attachment process difficult, with many setbacks. Their responses to Kirrie were dramatic. The foster parents saw it, too. I knew that something was happening that was more than a momentary experience.

I broadened my use of the dog and began an exploratory research project on the use of animals in play therapy. I immersed myself in the literature and had conversations with play therapists, animal behaviorists, positive dog trainers, animal-assisted therapists, veterinarians, biologists, educators, canine search-and-rescue handlers, and animal lovers. I tried new ideas of my own. I found a remarkable multidisciplinary group of people with similar interests and fascinating experiences. I discovered that there was a great deal of conceptual, empirical, and pragmatic literature available as I wandered into fields beyond my own.

This monograph is meant to share what I have learned so far and to open new fields of inquiry and practice that hold tremendous potential. The integration of animal-assisted therapy and play therapy seems a natural blend of two potent approaches, both with solid theoretical and expanding empirical bases. More multidisciplinary dialog and study is needed, and it promises to yield innovative ways of helping children and families. It could also assist the current human alienation from the natural world and promote kinder, more understanding relationships between the human and nonhuman animals that populate it.

Because this monograph is written primarily with mental health therapists in mind, I have not included much background information about the psychosocial problems that children have, assuming that most clinicians, and especially play therapists, would be well versed in this. Instead, my focus is to share the value and methods of involving kids and canines in play therapy in humane and clinically appropriate ways, and how this approach has the potential to facilitate practitioners' work and progress with children.

ANIMAL EMOTIONS AND THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND

What I learned is that dogs have feelings, too. I never even thought of that when I used to hurt them before. I think I was just passing along all the bad things that happened to me. Now, dogs are really my friends – some of my BEST friends.

-Eddie, 16-year-old adopted boy with a trauma history (from his journal)

Recent years have seen an explosion of scientific and popular books, articles, studies, websites, and television programs devoted to the human-animal bond. While animals have played a prominent role in science and literature for a long time, the wide range of topics, the focus on animal emotions and human-animal attachment, and the sheer volume of resources available today suggest a revitalized interest in all things animal. Materials come from many sources: biologists, veterinarians, ethologists, researchers, writers, social scientists, mental health practitioners, photographers, and ordinary people who want to share their experiences with animals. As scientific inquiry has increased the knowledge about the functions, mechanisms, and manifestations of emotions and social bonding in nonhuman animals, it has also contributed to the understanding of human emotions and attachment. Furthermore, much more is being learned about the role of interspecies relationships, especially human-animal bonds, and their positive and negative implications for those involved in them.

ANIMAL EMOTIONS

Many animals in addition to humans show emotions that are similar, perhaps identical, to those we call fear, joy, happiness, embarrassment, resentment, jealousy, rage, anger, love, pleasure, compassion, respect, relief, disgust, sadness, despair, and grief. Indeed, it is the shared emotions, their expression, and similar physiological and anatomical bases that truly blur the borders between them and us.

-Jane Goodall (*The Ten Trusts*)

It is no longer fruitful to ask if animals experience emotions, but, rather, why emotions have evolved – what functions they serve. The study of animal emotions, like the study of other behavior patterns,

depends on a careful blending of anecdotes, common sense, and “hard” empirical data. None of these are dispensable, despite skeptics’ denial of the importance of good animal tales.

-Marc Bekoff (The Ten Trusts)

For a long time, the mere mention of animal emotions or internal states drew the criticism of anthropomorphism (ascribing human emotions to animals) within scientific circles. While people sometimes do inaccurately project complex human motivations, intentions, and characteristics onto animal behaviors, the scientific climate seems to have opened sufficiently to permit modern theorizing, investigation, and discussion of animals’ emotions and their links to behavior and relationships. Many people are not aware that Darwin (1872/1965) explored comparative emotional expression in humans and animals. Careful analyses of case studies and qualitative research have demonstrated the breadth and depth of animal emotions (e.g., Masson, 1997; Masson & McCarthy, 1995; Thomas, 1993), but they have often been dismissed because of their lack of empirical “rigor.” More recently, the fields of neurobiology and psychobiology have enhanced the understanding of animal emotions in fundamental ways (e.g., Panksepp, 2005a, 2005b; Siviy, 1998; Siviy, Harrison, & McGregor, 2006). A wonderful DVD, *Why Dogs Smile and Chimpanzees Cry* (Fleisherfilm, 1999), uses fascinating film footage and interviews with biologists, animal behaviorists, and wildlife filmmakers to show convincingly that emotions and relationships play a critical role in animal survival and well-being.

There seems little question today that animals and people share many of the same physiological and behavioral responses that are indicative of emotions, and they often seek similar social attachments and relationships that help many species survive and thrive. Animal behaviors are no longer considered solely to be mechanistic expressions of instinctual drives; rather, they represent a combination of genetic, biological, and environmental processes, much like human behavior. Animals are capable of a wide range of emotions, complex thinking, decision making, compassion, problem solving, and even fair play (Bekoff, 2004, 2007; Goodall & Bekoff, 2002; Panksepp, 2005a). Greater understanding of the origins and expression of animal emotions has the potential to improve human-animal relationships to the benefit of both.

THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND

If you talk to the animals, they will talk to you and you will know each other. If you do not talk to them, you will not know them. And what you do not know, you will fear. What one fears, one destroys.

-Chief Dan George

The origins of human bonds with animals are shrouded in the mists of the distant past. Of course, past generations and indigenous peoples have lived in closer contact with the natural world than most people do today. Some animals have shared special bonds with humans for thousands of years, perhaps because these liaisons were mutually beneficial to survival. Animals worked with humans in exchange for shelter, food, or protection from predators and the elements. For example, archaeological evidence suggests that wolves lived in close contact with humans as long as 300,000 years ago and that dogs were the first domesticated animal, involved intimately with humans for at least 14,000 years (Clutton-Brock, 1995). For centuries, animals have assisted people with the tasks of living, such as horses transporting people and goods, and dogs hunting and herding in conjunction with human hunters and shepherds. These early functional relationships provided the foundations for current-day bonds that are now derived more from companionship and mutually enjoyable ventures than from working relationships (Katz, 2003).

The history of animal-human bonds and their benefits to both people and animals are reviewed in a variety of resources (Beck & Katcher, 1996, 2003; Becker & Morton, 2002; Douglas, 2006; Jalongo, 2004; Knapp, 1998; Melson, 2001; Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell, 2000; Schoen, 2001; Serpell, 1995, 1996). Hart (1995) has reviewed studies demonstrating that dogs provide companionship, mutual support, a sense of belonging, security, and social lubricant effects. There is substantial evidence that most families consider their pets to be full-fledged family members with whom they sometimes feel closer than with their human relatives (Bonas, McNicholas, & Collis, 2000).

Studies have found positive human physiological reactions to animals, including lowered blood pressure and heart rates, improved cardiovascular health, better recovery after serious illness or surgery, and reduced stress reactions coupled with greater relaxation (Becker & Morton, 2002; Fine, 2000, 2006; Friedmann, Thomas, & Eddy, 2000).

S. B. Barker and R. T. Barker (1988) describe a 1984 *Psychology Today* survey of 13,000 pet owners who believed that pets improved the quality of family relationships by reducing tensions and increasing fun, compassion, conversation, exercise, time spent together, and affection shown for other family members.

CHILDREN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ANIMALS

Companion animals should matter to educators, if for no other reason than that they matter so much to children.

-Mary Renck Jalongo

Animals play an important role in the lives of children (Jalongo, 2004; Melson, 2001). Children frequently draw animals, talk about animals, and even dream about animals. Many families obtain companion animals (pets) at the request of their children, and family dynamics, both healthy and dysfunctional, often incorporate the animals, as well (Hoover, 2006; Katz, 2003). When families relinquish pets against the wishes of children, it often has negative repercussions for the children for a very long time (Melson, 2001), including feelings of sadness, anger, worry, and loss.

Although child interactions with animals entail many responsibilities and drawbacks such as injuries to children and pets, allergies, and zoonoses (animal-related diseases), there are many advantages offered by the child-animal bond. Pets provide companionship to children, and many children consider them "friends." Guerney's (1991) study of latchkey children found that pets played an important role in children's coping with being home alone after school. Many other studies have found that children with companion animals have higher self-esteem, greater empathy, more engagement with peers, and other prosocial behaviors (Jalongo, 2004).

Children with a wide range of psychological and behavioral problems also seem to respond positively to animals. A common characteristic of children with abuse histories is that they are cruel to animals, yet when they are shown how to interact safely and kindly with animals and are supervised properly, their cruel behaviors are often replaced by empathy. Gonski (1985) found that the mere presence of a dog helped very distressed children in foster care quickly move from hostility, withdrawal, and resistance to much greater engagement, enthusiasm, laughter, and conversation.

Readers are urged to read the superb books by Melson (2001), Jalongo (2004), and Chandler (2005) for summaries of the research on child-animal bonds and thorough descriptions of the value of including animals in educational and therapeutic settings. Not only can children's negative behaviors toward animals be eliminated, but children's positive experiences with animals can help them educationally, developmentally, emotionally, and socially, and they can shape children's attachments – with animals and with people – throughout the child's life.

ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY

When we first walked into the therapist's office and saw the two big Poodles, I wondered if I'd made a mistake. It was not at all what I expected. Later I realized how much those dogs – and the therapist, of course – helped our family.

-Sylvie, mother of a 15-year-old boy

When I saw the Poodles, it changed my whole attitude. At first, I didn't want to go to counseling, but then I thought it couldn't be all bad if they had dogs there. Curly and Queenie helped me feel more comfortable there.

-David, the 15-year-old boy

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has built upon the benefits of the human-animal bond in order to assist therapeutic progress in a variety of professions, including psychotherapy. The Delta Society (2004) has defined AAT as follows:

AAT is a goal-directed intervention in which an animal meeting specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT is delivered and/or directed by a health/human service provider working within the scope of his/her profession. AAT is designed to promote improvement in human physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive functioning. (p. 11)

In AAT, animals have been used for rapport-building; decreasing anxiety; developing trust; fostering attachment; increasing openness; adding emotional safety; improving motivation; and developing physical, cognitive, emotional, and social competencies. Animals have been used

as a catalyst for social interactions and to decrease resistance. Animal involvement in therapeutic processes has ranged from the mere presence of animals in a therapeutic setting to full incorporation of animals in a wide range of therapeutic tasks. As the field of AAT has grown, efforts have been made to define it more clearly, establish standards for practice, and conduct research.

Animal-assisted therapy has been developing steadily since its early use by psychologist Boris Levinson (Levinson & Mallon, 1997) in psychological assessment, psychotherapy, residential treatment, education, and family therapy. Several excellent resources detail the practice of AAT, including its history, methods, training, applicability, ethical guidelines, and research (Chandler, 2005; Delta Society, 2004; Fine, 2000, 2006). Many different animals have been employed in AAT programs, including horses, dogs, cats, birds, rabbits, gerbils, reptiles, and dolphins.

Applications of AAT and the animal-human bond have been explored and researched by professionals from a variety of fields, such as biology, ethology, neuroscience, animal behaviorism, human and veterinary medicine, education, human development, and psychology. Because of this variety of theoretical and methodological orientations, it can be challenging to evaluate and draw conclusions about the body of work that has been done. In fact, it seems that the lack of multidisciplinary dialog has led some professionals in psychology, human development, and their related clinical fields to a common, but inaccurate conclusion that there is no support for the efficacy of AAT.

THE USEFULNESS OF AAT

Studies have shown AAT to be valuable for a variety of problem areas, such as children with autism (Sams, Fortney, & Willenbring, 2006), posttraumatic stress disorder (Altschuler, 1999), youth maladjustment and conflict with parents (Strand, 2004), chronic medical conditions (Gorczyca et al., 2006), adolescent anger management (Hanselman, 2001), and for effective differential diagnosis of several child problems (Prothmann et al., 2005). Animals have been used successfully in mental health programs (Carpenter, 2005; Fine, 2006; Hayden, 2005; Kruger & Serpell, 2006; Woolley, 2005), speech therapy (Adams, 1997), and educational and residential settings (e.g., Jalongo, 2004; Jalongo, Astorino, &

Bomboy, 2004; Sullivan, 2006; www.cbryouthconnect.org; www.greenchimneys.org; www.gressmountainranch.com).* AAT has also been used in youth correctional and detention facilities (e.g., Bondarenko, 2007; Loar & Colman, 2004) and for crisis response with child and family victims and rescue personnel at disaster sites (Greenbaum, 2006; Kohr, 2006; Shane, 2006).

The body of research evidence that demonstrates the value of AAT continues to grow. Chandler (2005) has reviewed studies that show a positive impact of AAT in a number of arenas; psycho-physiological health, anxiety, dementia, depression, motivation, self-esteem enhancement, children in pediatric hospitals, children with developmental disorders, children and adolescents with emotional and behavioral problems, elderly people, physically disabled people, and psychiatric patients. In two editions, Fine (2000, 2006) has thoroughly discussed research methodology and protocols, reliable and valid measures, and the current status of empirical support for AAT. A recent meta-analysis of AAT showed moderate effect sizes for improvements in several problem areas, and the use of dogs was associated with moderately high effect size (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). Although enthusiasm for AAT is widespread and empirical studies have shown its potential value, more research on its processes, outcomes, and applications will strengthen its place in mental health treatment.

AAT CREDENTIALS

A number of certification programs have been developed, often in conjunction with training programs. A good first step toward therapy certification is the American Kennel Club's (AKC) Canine Good Citizen® certification (www.akc.org, then search "CGC"). The program was developed to encourage appropriate training for dogs so that they behave well at home and in the community. It is open to all dogs and owners. This program, developed in the United States in 1989, has been adopted for use in many other countries, as well. It provides a good indication whether a dog has had sufficient training to move into more advanced canine therapy training programs.

The best known animal-assisted therapy certification programs include those of the Delta Society (www.deltasociety.org; Delta Society,

*Although all websites cited in this monograph were correct at the time of publication, they are subject to change at any time.

2004) and Therapy Dogs International (TDI; www.tdi-dog.org). Potential therapy dogs and their handlers must meet specified criteria before being certified. Having one of these credentials and maintaining active membership also provides insurance that covers the use of therapy dogs in most settings.

PLAY AND PLAY THERAPY

How come dogs know how to play and grown-ups don't?

-Val, 5-year-old girl

Many animals, including humans, play actively during their formative years and to a lesser extent, throughout their lives. The ability to read play signals and to interact through play behaviors often crosses species lines (Bekoff, 2007). Play bows and play faces signal “no harm intended” in order to initiate and maintain play in much the same way that children’s statement of “Let’s pretend” communicates that all that follows is imaginative and “not for real.” There are many similarities between the play of humans and that of other animals, perhaps explaining why cross-species play is possible.

ANIMAL PLAY

Play confers a freedom that is not available in any other realm of a dog's life. No wonder they enjoy it and want to engage in it so often.

-Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson

(Dogs Never Lie About Love)

Studies of animal play provide a unique perspective on human play. A few key resources are highlighted here. Bekoff and Byers (1998) compiled the work of key animal play researchers to explore a wide range of play behaviors and their possible functions, including play as a means to facilitate learning, enhance cognitive development, increase response options, and improve the ability to “read” and react to complex environmental conditions. Pellegrini and P. K. Smith (2005) compare human play with that of the great apes, focusing on different types of play, such as object play, social play, and fantasy play. Burghardt (2005) has proposed useful criteria for defining play behaviors across species that distinguish play from exploratory or stereotypical behaviors that