



## Animal-Assisted **Interactions** (AAI)

**Most children have positive feelings about animals—they love to pet them, read about them, draw them and tell stories about the pets in their lives, both real and imaginary!**

**There is no doubt that contact with pets and other animals can help develop nurturing behavior in children. Learning that animals have feelings, just as we do, can be a huge step toward developing empathy in children. However, children are not the only ones who can benefit from interactions with pets. Everyone benefits from these interactions, senior citizens and people with disabling conditions do as well.**



**H**ealth care and social welfare professionals have developed programs for their clients and patients based on the bond between people and animals. Contact with an animal may be a healthy experience, both physically and psychologically. Residents of extended care facilities can benefit tremendously from the presence of a sociable pet. A purring cat, curled up in the lap of an elderly person, can provide important therapy. We are still learning just how beneficial such relationships can be. A pet can reduce loneliness, provide opportunities for residents to interact with each other and spark wonderful memories of childhood pets. Not only do animals help create positive feelings, but studies have demonstrated that there are true physical benefits to human and animal interactions. Socializing with animals may lower blood pressure, steady heart rates and result in endorphins being released into the blood stream.

There are different types of animal-assisted interactions. Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is goal oriented. From having a pet assist in physical therapy sessions to helping a child improve his or her reading skills, well-trained, registered animals of all types can provide therapy. For example, in the classroom, a registered Pet Partner team may be invited to help a student who is experiencing reading difficulties. The teacher or school's reading specialist may work with the team, consisting of an animal (usually a dog or a cat) and a human partner, to identify which students might benefit from this therapy. They meet with the



team to discuss goals and strategies. The team then visits the student at his school weekly with the goal of reading a book. A child who may be shy and lack confidence in reading aloud will read to the animal—a non-judgmental, cuddly friend. Goals are set for the child, and the pet therapy team helps the child to accomplish them.

**A**nimals may also be used in the classroom for animal-assisted activities (AAA). Again, although the goal is to provide fun and enrichment to students, the Pet Partner team is still a trained unit and registered by either the Delta Society or another certifying organization (e.g., Therapy Dogs International). Animal-assisted activities in the classroom may include a “show & tell” about the animal, their needs, allowing students to read to the animals. In this case, however therapeutic goals are not set, rather, the reading is for enjoyment and pleasure.

Another example of an animal-assisted activity is experiencing the sense of pleasure an animal’s company provides. Imagine a family with a seriously ill child. Many hours are spent on hospital visits and seeing to the needs of their child. However, other children in the family may be feeling somewhat neglected. These siblings need attention and reassurance. Imagine this disheartened child when a registered therapy dog team walks in the hospital room and asks if he is interested in visiting. The team will reach out to all members of a family in crisis—including the members that are not sick. A

therapy dog visit can change the energy in the room. Everyone gets a chance to pet the dog and feel his tail-wagging. Visits like this can help the entire family to relax and smile.

Horses can provide great opportunities for both animal-assisted therapy as well as animal-assisted activities. Therapeutic riding programs are used to help children and adults with a disabling condition develop not only confidence, but balance, flexibility and muscle strength. The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NAHRA) set standards for safe, professional and ethical riding practices throughout the United States and Canada.

It is never too soon to involve youth in volunteer activities. Volunteering with a pet is a great motivator for kids and animal-assisted activities may be a wonderful venue through which one may learn empathy and compassion. There are some terrific, well-written books your students may enjoy reading about animal-assisted therapy and activities. Some titles are *Parrots Don't Make Housecalls* by Trina Weibe and *Creature Comfort: Animals That Heal* by Bernie Graham, for young adults.

There are animal-assisted therapy teams at work volunteering in almost every community. A call to your local shelter or animal welfare organization may yield a pet partner team who will enjoy to visiting your school and speaking to your students about the benefits and rewards of animal-assisted therapy and activities.

