



**Helping April Talk
Selective mutism and animal assistive therapy**

Maya Schwartz Laufer, PhD

Student

ABSTRACT

Communication comes easy to most people, however, to children with selective mutism, day to day communication with their environment can be challenging and somethings even impossible. This paper explores how animal assistive therapy can help children with selective mutism communicate better in their every day environment; using various animals such as: dogs, cats, guinea pigs, bunnies, birds etc.

Keywords: *Animal Assistive Therapy, dogs, cats, guinea pigs.*

Citation: Maya Schwartz Laufer (2022). Helping April Talk Selective mutism and animal assistive therapy. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies*, 4(1), 314-318.

INTRODUCTION

Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) is the utilization of animals as a therapeutic method; it is the deliberate inclusion of an animal in a treatment plan. Generally, it involves a credentialed treatment provider who guides interactions between a patient and an animal in order to realize specific goals [1] Animal-assisted therapy has been practiced for many years and can be a useful intervention for individuals or groups. Studies found positive outcomes and overall improved emotional well-being in individuals with autism, [2], medical conditions, compromised mental functioning [3], emotional difficulties [4], undesirable behaviors [5], and physical problems [6]. Additionally, AAT has been used with individuals across the lifespan; including children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly. The bond between humans and animals has evidence for existing throughout history. Prehistoric cave drawings depict men and wolves sitting around the campfire, evidence from ancient Egypt has shown kings with their cats; men, horses and dogs kept each other company while hunting and to this day, people keep various animals as their pets. Animal assisted therapy has had many names throughout the years, for example: pet – facilitated therapy, pet assisted therapy, pet therapy, pet - oriented child psychotherapy, animal facilitated therapy, animal assisted activity and animal visitation. The bond between humans and animals is truly amazing. Only humans interact with other species in such a myriad of ways. We have created an extremely complex array of relationships with animals, demanding everything from physical sustenance to labor, companionship and entertainment. How we look upon animals is dependent on the particular species in question and our own culture bias [7]. Florence Nightingale - the founder of social work, first identified the therapeutic potential of animals in the 1800s, through observations and surveys conducted by psychiatric institutions that small pets helped reduce anxiety in patients — children and adults alike. Even Sigmund Freud noticed, during a session with a patient, that the dog recognized the patient's stress level and kept his distance; however, when stress lever reduced, the dog came closer to the patient. Freud also used his dog to facilitate communication with his patients; Freud found that many patients felt more comfortable talking through and accompanying the dog and so this interaction served as a springboard, until they felt comfortable talking directly with Freud. In the early 1960s, Boris Levinson, a child psychotherapist, noticed that one of his patients (who had verbal communication difficulties) began to communicate with him when his dog was present in the room during treatment; Levinson then began to notice similar effects in other patients. Levinson's work taught us that modern society is constantly changing, thus has stirred away from nature in general and animals in particular. This remoteness causes people to feel lonely, anxious and alienated: “Man finds himself a stranger to himself, cries out in his anxiety, he has lost the key to self- understanding. Levinson believed that animals serve as an intermediate in human history, by returning to emotional and mental health, and enabling a detached person to maintain the initial and vital connection with nature, instincts and his or her inner self.

Animal assistive therapy advantages:

There are many researches showing the physiological, psychological and social advantages that animals provide human beings. AAT is defined as a form of therapy which involves using animals as a fundamental part of one's treatment. The most common animal used in AAT are dogs, followed by cats. Smaller animals are also being used such as: bunnies, birds, fish and gerbils, but there are also larger animals that can be used such as horses, elephants, dolphins and a wide types of reptiles. The range of “problems” that are used for such treatment is broad; most people know about

guide - dogs and dogs used for seizure alert. The general public is slowly coming to know that animals can be used to deal with a large variety of psychological, emotional distress and general stress related symptoms. Some animals interventions involve treatment of cognitive functioning, social interaction issues and autism [8].

Physiological:

Animals have positive physiological effects; while studying 26 children, their blood pressure was significantly lower in the presence of a dog than without it [9].

Psychological:

Unconditional and non-judgmental love and affection are the most well-known and prominent benefits of a relationship with animals, they give people a sense of closeness, security, origin and pride. Animals contribute to the development of responsibility and empathy, help to elevate self-esteem, and contribute to a sense of control and satisfaction.

Social:

Katcher [9] Identified 4 components of an alliance between humans and animals:

Security - the sense of security that is felt when an animal is with us or accompanies us.

Intimacy - the ability to reach intimacy with the animal (touch, caress).

Proximity - treating the animal as a family member. (Sleeping in bed, dealing with loss).

Permanence - the immutability of the animal, in contrast to the rest of the family (who grow and change physically and psychologically).

Social:

One of the major benefits that animals provide to their owners, is the opportunity to make new connections [10]. Whether in random encounters or social gatherings, the presence of an animal will always attract attention and response, as well as give humans an "excuse" to start a simple and non-binding conversation, thus Create a bridge for social interaction.

Case anamnesis:

For the past year, I have been working as an animal assistive therapist in a small petting zoo at "Ahavat Zion" Elementary school in Tel Aviv, Israel. I have 20 groups of kids (average of 5 kids in each group) in which I meet with once a week. During my work there; I have encountered one particular student who intrigued me and for this paper I have chosen to work with her as an individual. April (alias) A six and a half year - old girl, first grader, diagnosed with selective mutism. She first came to me after the guidance counselor opened a group for first grader at the school's petting zoo; up until then, the animal assistive therapy was designated for second graders and up only. Before diving into April's specific case, one must comprehend the definition of selective mutism. According to The American Psychiatric Association 2013: Selective mutism; is an anxiety disorder, characterized by a lack of verbal (and sometimes non - verbal) communication in specific settings. Although these children can speak well in certain environments (at home, with family, or close friends) they are mute or extremely hesitant to communicate in other social settings.

These children are able to use and understand speech, but demonstrated a persistent ability to communicate in specific settings. This ability becomes a pattern of behavior. In order to diagnose selective mutism, it must be ongoing for a least one month, taking into consideration that lack of communication in the first few months of the first year of school or pre - school, which is considered normal. In order to be diagnosed with selective mutism, the child must present impairment in daily functioning for more than a month and rule out other verbal communication issues such as - speech impairment, autism, and stuttering. In April's case one must take into consideration the Covid19 pandemic - in which schools were closed several times during her first year, which prevented a consecutive long enough period of time to acclimate properly. April, has a twin brother at the same school but in a different class. The twins have two mothers, who recently separated after a 14 - year relationship. Both mothers are in their late 40's and made sure their houses are physically close to one another, since they have joint custody of the twins. The birth mother is a clinical psychologist specializing in eating disorders in children and teenagers. The second mother is an alternative therapist who never carried a child, which was one of the reasons for the couple's separation. April was never actually diagnosed with selective mutism because the parents never took her to a specialist. Other than that, April has hyper sensitivity issued with tight clothes - she refuses to wear underwear and wears only baggy clothes. The birth mother reports healthy development as a baby with some shy behaviorism patterns. April has always been shy, however, Only at the first grade, April and her twin brother were put in separate classes; (before - hand, at kindergarten, they were in the same class together) which is when April's mutism took a turn to the worst.

Therapeutic purpose:

After Meeting April several times and only hearing about her from the guidance counselor, I decided to focus this paper on her and meet with the birth mother. Although the mother does not think her daughter is suffering from selective mutism, but from simple shyness; after doing some research in the matter, it is obvious that April is a text book selective mutism case; plus, the guidance counselor and school psychologist also suggested this diagnosis.

The main purpose of this treatment is to “cure” April from her selective mutism; however, getting her to talk to me will be the first step. Although at our second session she looked straight at me and spoke to me directly, I believe it was some sort of a “glitch” since she was sitting with a young bunny in her lap, patting it, therefor she did not pay attention to what was going on around her and answered a question I asked her directly; a first sign of efficiency to AAT. Her home room teacher reports no direct communication with her at all. I started seeing April in a group of five other first graders, three boys and two girls – April and a close friend of hers, which seemed to communicate for her.

Case analysis according to psychological sources:

When young children encounter a new environment or a stranger, they often become inhibited. They are hesitant in exploring their new environment or stranger, resulting in long latencies of responding; children tend to regress to less mature forms of play [11]. Kagan, Reznick, et al [12] established the term: behavioral inhibition toward the unfamiliar to describe these differences. The use of this term is appropriate because psychologists use a variety of descriptors, depending on the inhibiting situation, to describe in everyday language these individual differences for social situations.

Another advantage of this term is that it is less likely to be confused with unsociability or avoidance than is the lay term shy or the concept of the slow-to-warm-up child. From a motivational point of view, inhibition refers to an approach-avoidance conflict: A person is motivated to approach another person, but this approach tendency is inhibited. This motivational state is different from disinterest in the other person.

The social aspect of group work:

After taking April for several one on one sessions, I realized something. While sitting and eating my sandwich on a recess, April came to me with a few of her class mates and asked if they can go inside the petting zoo; I realized she feels more comfortable speaking to me when there are other children around her rather than when she is alone with me. From that moment on, our sessions were in a group of her and her three other classmates with whom she felt safe and free around and has been talking to me almost freely ever since. The average man today obtains his sense of identity from his belonging to a nation, rather from being a ‘son of a man’ sense of identity, individuality vs. herd conformity the need for an individual identity is, according to Fromm, a further essential characteristic of man Humans need to feel like they belong, in every age group, but in early life especially; it is their “safe place” their second home – like a school, an age group, just the girls or just the boys, there is a basic human connection that is almost tribal- like in a pack of wolves, that makes them feel safe and helps reassures them until they find their own individual place in the world.

Case analysis according to zoological sources:

Animals, in a group session, have a double role: One - the encounter with animals, the contact, the unmediated connection, allows personification and identification with their feelings and used as a catalyst for expression of their inner world, not necessarily in a direct approach. The second role - the animals being a mediating tool for improving communication and social relations between the participants. The advantage of communicating with animals with whom you can communicate non-verbally, which makes it easier for people who have difficulty communicating verbally [13] With April, I tried and introduced all animals to her. In order to asses which animal works best for and with her. We started with a tour of the entire compound. She liked the bunnies – they were soft and fluffy but did not sit quietly with her, which made her uneasy. Then we tried our birds- we have a hen, ducks and cocktail parrots. Something about them waving their wings made her recoil. Next we tried some reptiles: at the time I had some Vietnamese sticks which made April not enter the premises when I held it in my hand. Finally we tried the guinea pigs, she felt very comfortable with them in her lap, since they did not move much and were calmly letting her pat them; every time she patted their nose, they moved their heads up and made a squeaking sound which made her laugh. She could just sit with a guinea pig for the entire session and not notice she was talking to me. After finding the “right” animal for her we had a few sessions with the guinea-pig, in which she would simply sit with the animal, pat it and laugh every time it squeaked. It made her feel safe to have that quite animal in her lap, not trying to run away from her, reacting to her patting, eating everything she gave it and just being there for her without an expiration date. In the next sessions I introduced our new kittens to her and my own therapeutic dog – Zoti; so the animals I chose to focus on in this paper are: guinea-pigs, Cats and dogs.

Aspects related to activities with and around the animals relevant to the encounters:

After learning more about selective mutism, I tried to comprehend which tactic might work better for us. Pushing her to talk, waiting for her to engage, or just letting go and realizing that being in the moment – keeping busy – weather

patting an animal, building something together, cleaning and tending to the animals, anything that takes her mind of the fact that I am a grown up. Therefore in the first few sessions I tried talking to her while learning about the animals and caring for them. After a few sessions I finally figured out what makes her talk to me, I have learned that getting her to speak works well with humor; while learning new things, she asked questions and forgot I was a grown up and honestly, so did I. I realized I did not need to push her to talk to me and we should just go with the flow. I learned she relaxes – while sitting and watching the various birds at our zoo, asks questions about them and talks to me without thinking; simply reacting to the animals. I also learned that Being active makes her more verbal- cleaning, feeding, building etc. Even though Birds are not really her “thing”, Naming new young parrots brings out the best in her. Having said that, she was still sad when they died. After the young parrots died (broke out of the cage and were eaten by cats) Working with hardware tools empowers her and getting a job done and keeping animals safe feels great! The most important thing I have learned about April is that **She loves dogs**. In general, she connects more with furry animals than with reptiles or birds. As I started taking my Dog to work with me – Zoti, a 7 year old mixed boxer, I noticed that the dog adjusted herself to the child in front of her; whether that child wanted to play with her, pat her, walk with her, or kiss her – Zoti devoted herself to that child. April immediately related to her and started patting her, Zoti reacted with licking April’s face – which made her laugh out loud. I then gave April Zoti’s treats and taught her some dog tricks. They were both extremely happy when they succeeded easily in most of the agility exercises.

Other than the dog, April related to one of the guinea pigs and even took her home for a vacation. She loved the sound and movement the guinea pig made when she petted her nose (the guinea pig would whistle and lift its head up quickly) it made her laugh and she could do it repeatedly for a long period of time. When I found three abandoned kittens, April refused to touch them at first – for fearing the kitten might scratch or bite her. As time progressed she enjoyed their tiny nibbling teeth on her fingers, it made her laugh; she could sit the entire session on one of the hammocks and pet a kitten to sleep and you can see the relaxation the purring little kitten induced on her.

Significant encounter 2/2/2021:

On our 10th session I brought my dog – Zoti, a mixed breed of boxer. Zoti is very friendly, both to people and other animals, especially cats, she lives with five felines and treats them like their mother. On that session we actually reached a breakthrough in our communication; when April made direct eye contact with me for a long period of time while patting Zoti and learning her life story, what her likes and dislikes are, where she sleeps, how many cats she has at home and what kind of tricks she can and can not do. April maintained eye contact through

out the entire session and was so eager to learn how to lead Zoti on a leash, make her sit and say hello, play with her toy – throwing it far and having Zoti fetch it back to her, while laughing and cheering her on. She was the most verbal I have ever witnessed her to be and we were all so happy for the breakthrough. When sharing this with the guidance counselor she was thrilled to hear of it too and informed her parents of the process.

Guidance counselor meeting:

While understanding April’s situation, meeting with both her mothers, who recently separated, treating her twin brother (for different issues) and keeping the guidance counselor in the loop the one who brought the selective mutism to the table, I realized that by not taking April to a specialist in the field and working on the issue in more aspects, even though both her parents come from the therapeutic field was probably doing her more harm than good, but unfortunately “the shoemaker goes barefoot”.

Analysis and evaluation

When I first met April, she was very introverted and did not make any eye contact. It was only on our 10th session - when I brought Zoti – my dog, that she finally looked straight at me and wanted to learn how to tame her. She did speak to me before, while working and cleaning but she never really made substantial eye contact until that session. That session was the turning point of our meetings and ever since then I bring Zoti to work with me; even though all the other kids interact with her, April will always have a special place in my heart for realizing the importance of therapeutic connection – which I recently began to study.

Implications for the future

With great certainty, animals cause children various and interesting reactions: Joy and laughter, constant questions, identification, mercy, contemplation, and most of all – unconditional love! Animals never criticize us and accept us as exactly the way we are: with all our weaknesses, sadness and joy, and the age-related restrictions. More than that: animals are always there for us, in our loneliest moments and when we need a sympathetic ear without judgment or opinion. When it comes to dogs, it is an expressive animal that can help treat a large variety of issues. A dog gives the patient a sense of comfort and trust in patients in need of strengthened boundaries and self-discipline, fulfill instructions, touch, cultivate the ability to identify expressions, needs, feelings and improving social communication skills. When it comes to cats, their therapeutic power is in their purring motor which immediately lowers blood pressure and heartbeat,

helps in subsiding physical pain and relaxes all out mental systems (web.md). Guinea pigs are very cute animals and are very easy to begin with, when a child is deterred from larger animals; unlike bunnies, most guinea pigs stay still and lets you pat them while reacting to that touch in a funny and stress releasing behavior. Different animals are used for different issues, the secret is finding the precise animal for a patient, however, the path to finding the right animal is part of the therapeutic process for both the patient and the therapist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Chandler, C. K. (2005). *Animal Assisted Therapy in Counseling*. New York: Routledge. dementia. *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias* 16(4): 234–239.
2. Redefer, L. A. and Goodman, J. F. (1989). Brief report: Pet-facilitated therapy with autistic children. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 19(3): 461–467.
3. Kanamori, M., Suzuki, M., Yamamoto, K., Kanda, M., Matsui, Y., Kojima, E., Fukawa, H., Sugita, T. and Os- hiro, H. (2001). A day care program and evaluation of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) for the elderly with senile dementia. *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias* 16(4): 234–239.
4. Barker, S. B. and Dawson, K. S. (1998). The effects of animal-assisted therapy on anxiety ratings of hospitalized psychiatric patients. *Psychiatric Services* 49(6): 797–801.
5. Nagengast, S. L., Baun, M. M., Megel, M. and Leibowitz, J. M. (1997). The effects of the presence of a com- panion animal on physiological arousal and behavioral distress in children during a physical examination. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* 12(6): 323–330.
6. Nathanson, D. E., Castro, D., Friend, H. and McMahan, M. (1997). Effectiveness of short-term dolphin- assisted therapy for children with severe disabilities. *Anthrozoös* 10(2/3): 90–100.
7. Pavlides, M. (2008). *Animal-assisted interventions for individuals with autism*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
8. Fine, A. H. (Ed.). (2010). *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice*. academic press.
9. Friedmann, E., Katcher, A. H., Thomas, S. A., Lynch, J. J., & Messent, P. R. (1983). Social interaction and blood pressure: influence of animal companions. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*.
10. Shalev, A. (1996). *The furry healer: Pets as a therapeutic means: Theory, research and practice*. Tel-Aviv: Tcherikover Publishers (Hebrew).
11. Asendorpf, J. (1985). Manual for coding the behavior of young children during contact initiation episodes (Research Rep. No. 7/1985). Mu- nich, Federal Republic of Germany: *Max-Planck-Institut für psy- chologische Forschung*.
12. Kagan, J., Reznick, J. S., Clarke, C., Snidman, N., & Garcia-Coll, C. (1984). Behavioral inhibition to the unfamiliar. *Child development*, 2212-2225.
13. Beck, A. M. (1983). Animals in the city'in AH Katcher and AM Beck. *New Perspectives on Our Lives with Companion Animals*.