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Animals lend a paw in therapy

Pioneering practice
By John Davidson
The Denver Post

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Ellen Kinney rubs the belly of Sasha.
Fellow psychotherapist Linda
Chassman is in the background at the
Animal Assisted Therapy Programs of
Colorado. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The
Denver Post)

Sasha and the children pile onto the floor of a converted Victorian house that's less than a block from noisy East Cc

The upper-level room is homey, with all the trimmings of a place where people once lived: overstuffed couch and cl
Bright plastic toys are scattered about and white curtains flutter in a warm breeze.

Garrett, 12, carefully wraps an elastic bandage around Sasha's leg. Then Grace, 6, bends down and listens to Sast

plastic stethoscope before whispering something into the animal's ear.

Sasha is a 7-year-old rescued shelter dog. She lies calmly on the floor as these kids show a visitor how things are done. This is part of the Animal Assisted Therapy Programs of Colorado. The professional counseling practice is one of the first in the nation to promote animal-assisted therapy as its focus, its founder says.

Research has shown that contact with animals can lower human anxiety, stress and blood pressure, help children talk about their problems, and help defuse anger.

While actual clients could not be observed because of privacy issues, the staff at Animal Assisted Therapy Program enlisted Garrett and Grace to illustrate how people and animals interact during therapy here.

Sasha, a mellow mutt of undetermined lineage, belongs to Ellen Kinney, a psychotherapist. She explains how the dog helps clients work through their problems.

"Some kids have difficulty with experiences in the hospital," Kinney says. "Working on Sasha (demonstrates) how kids cope with all the poking and prodding."

And Grace's whispering?

"Kids will tell Sasha how they feel. They know Sasha went through being homeless and the kids can tell her about that."

Animal-assisted therapy is not new, but until recently it has not been the core of a professional counseling practice, says Chassman.

Chassman, who opened the Denver practice in May, says she got into it accidentally by using two feral cats she had rescued. "I love animals and love working with animals," Chassman says.

Before her husband, an aerospace worker, was transferred to Colorado, Chassman practiced in Orange County, California. She started using her cats informally during sessions with clients.

"I saw the therapeutic benefits," she says. "There's just a range of them."

Animals can be useful in treating a wide range of human issues, from grief and depression to autism and relationship problems.

Chassman, a psychotherapist with a doctoral degree, says her 1-year-old therapy cat, Mazey, helps calm couples who are tense. "It's like... well, like cats and dogs."

"I put Mazey between them," she says. "If things start getting tense, she senses it and starts to leave. They stop being tense and they stay."

A third member of the practice, Suzanne Carter, will soon start equine therapy with a horse stabled in Evergreen.

Clients at this practice have the option of having traditional therapy or animal-assisted therapy, Chassman says. In choosing to have animals present.

In one program, which Chassman says she pioneered, therapists train people how to work with animals in their own homes. "Filial pet therapy," it involves parents using their own family pets to address problems with children.

Clients also can bring their own pets into therapy sessions at the office, as long as these animals are pre-screened by the staff.

Chassman says she has been swamped with applications from people who want to work in her practice. She aspires to a research program. "This (type of therapy) is so new there isn't enough research," she says.

The psychotherapist adds that she is pleased that she has relocated to a metropolitan area that is at the forefront of the connection between people and pets.

The American Humane Association, based here, recently put together a manual to help child care professionals incorporate animals into their work. The organization also helped fund the Institute for Human-Animal Connection at the University of Colorado, which is studying the various ways animals affect social and legal issues, such as some battered women being reluctant to have pets because most won't allow pets.

Although Chassman's practice is one of the first of its kind, it won't be the last, one national expert says.

"This is definitely a coming trend," says Dr. Sharon Green, a faculty member at NOVA Southeastern University in Florida, which is developing an equine therapy program.

"Research is (now) being done about animal-assisted therapy," Green says. "Before, we just had an intuitive feeling."

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