

Animal assisted therapy has existed in some fashion for centuries. In many cases, animals most beloved by man, especially dogs and horses, have played an integral role in the physical, occupational, emotional, and play therapy for many individuals. They have been used with good results in working with the chronically ill, mentally disabled, physically disabled, and emotionally disturbed children. The benefits gained from animal assisted therapy are not restricted to therapeutic values, but also contribute to the improvement in the quality of life for patients with severe physical and mental limitations. Unfortunately, as with many other necessary services for the disabled, animal assisted therapy is often beyond the means of their families and of the schools in which they are enrolled.

Disabled children in Texas are provided academic support through their school district's Special Education programs. Children enrolled in Special Education programs within the State of Texas must meet the eligibility criteria

specified in the Texas Education Code (n.d.). Specifically, a child is determined to be a "child with a disability" and eligible for special education if any of the following disabilities are present:

- Autism
- Physical disability
- Mental retardation
- Emotional disturbance
- Learning disability
- Speech disability
- Traumatic brain injury

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) (2007b) reported that in 2007, over 474,681 of the 4,576,933 students, enrolled in the state of Texas were Special Education Students, totaling nearly 11% of the student population. In San Antonio, there were 371,302 total students, 12% of which were considered special education. The chart below summarizes the percentage and number of students enrolled in special education in the four-county service area:

2006-2007 Special Education Student Enrollment

County	Number of students enrolled in County	Number of Special Education Students	Percentage of total
Bandera	2,886	424	14.7%
Bexar	301,194	35,946	11.6%
Comal	21,494	2,414	11.2%
Kendall	7,445	692	9.3%

(TEA, 2007a)

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, disabled citizens made up 19.3% of the national population. Statewide in Texas, the number is slightly lower at 19.2%. In the San Antonio area, however, both Banderita and Bexar Counties have higher disabled population rates, 20.7% and 21%, respectively. On the other hand, Comal and Kendall Counties have smaller disabled populations, 18% and 16.4%, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Animal Assisted Programs

Animal Assisted Therapy is the deliberate inclusion of a pet or animal in a treatment plan. Pets are frequently prescribed in order to provide companionship that will combat loneliness, stress, depression, and other emotional problems (Arkow, n.d.). Animal assisted therapy has also shown to be an effective type of therapy for children and adults with special needs. It is unique in that it can supplement the physical, occupational, and emotional therapy needs of a patient. It has been found that many animals, even rabbits, birds, or fish, can be beneficial for therapeutic purposes (Equine Therapy, n.d.[c]). For the elderly, pet assisted therapy frequently provides the needed companionship to improve emotional health, by making a clinical room more comfortable or by providing a safe relationship in which to let one's guard down (Equine Therapy, n.d.[d]).

Studies of pet ownership indicate that pet owners display a decrease in heart disease, a decrease in Alzheimer's-related aggression, as well as a decrease in blood pressure. Among children with emotional disorders, there has been a correlation between their interaction with domesticated animals and their increased capacity for empathy (Heimlich, 2001) and other interpersonal behaviors, such as alienation and self-esteem (Poresky, 1999).

Compared with pet ownership and visitation programs, animal assisted therapy allows animals and handlers to work with an individual towards achieving specific therapeutic goals, with progress being measured (Gale Encyclopedia of Alternative Medicine, 2001). It has been demonstrated that human-animal interaction is linked to improved health and well

being. Additionally, the interaction has been shown to teach important lessons:

- Love, attachment, and comfort
- Sensorimotor and nonverbal learning
- Responsibility, nurturance, and a sense of competence
- Learning about life, death, and grief
- Therapeutic benefits to psychological and physical health
- Nurturing humanness, ecological awareness, and ethical responsibility

(Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, 2006)

One of the most common types of animal assisted therapy is canine therapy. Canine Assisted Therapy utilizes dogs to provide interaction for both children and adults. The experience of playing and being around dogs provides an anxiety release that combats depression and increases physical activity. A dog can encourage motion, for example crawling, that provides exercise for otherwise unused muscles, as well as provide companionship that persuades patients to relax and smile. This level of comfort then allows for greater diligence and progress in therapeutic activities. Dogs with the appropriate temperament are assigned to patients in order to effectively work toward the therapeutic goals (Equine Therapy, n.d.[c]).

In addition to canine therapy, there are several types of animal assisted therapy that are becoming more increasingly used:

- Dolphin Assisted Therapy (DAT)
- Feline Assisted Therapy
- Bovine Assisted Therapy
- Elephant Assisted Therapy

(Equine Therapy, n.d.[c]).

Equine Therapy

Equine Assisted Therapy involves using a horse as a therapeutic tool. With the help of both a mental health professional, as well as a horse professional, patients learn to work with the horse either by caring for it (grooming, feeding, leading), or by riding it (Equine Therapy, n.d.[d]). There are two main types of equine assisted therapy that differ based on objectives and focuses: therapeutic riding and hippotherapy. Therapeutic riding is geared

toward teaching the disabled how to ride a horse. This exercise enables increased strength, coordination, and control, as well as social and psychological benefits. Hippotherapy, on the other hand, focuses on treatment of the disability as a form of speech, occupational, and physical therapy, by allowing the horse's movement to influence the rider. Therapy goals are set in order to achieve greater balance, control, and orientation (The Saddle Light Center, n.d.). These forms of therapy are unique in that a horse's stride is similar to a human's and allows the rider's body to strengthen and develop muscles that are weak because of a limited ability to walk. Muscles that lack development due to certain disabilities are strengthened and toned.

Research has shown that equine therapy is beneficial for patients with many disabilities, including the Pervasive Developmental Disorders Asperger's and Autism, which are characterized by communication impairments or hyper-focus. Equine Therapy assists with the behavior modification through the rhythmic motion of horse riding. The produced calming effect allows increased focus to develop. Motor skills can also be addressed through the processes of riding, grooming, and tacking. In addition, social skills are improved with the interaction between other members of the group, or the counselors supervising (Equine Therapy, n.d.[a]).

Gross motor function has been shown to increase among children with neuro-muscular disorders (McGibbon, et al, 1998). Animal assisted therapy has also been demonstrated to decrease anxiety among children with emotional disorders (Parker, 2001), and increased vocalization among children with neurological disorders that limit their speech (Boudreau, 2001).

Disabled and special needs children find many benefits from equine therapy. Horse riding requires the development of balance and coordination, which leads to muscle growth and increased motor skills. Grooming leads to an increased awareness of the importance of others;

commanding the horse provides confidence in communication skills that leads to developed social skills. Studies show that a wide range of disabilities can be improved, such as Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome, Multiple Sclerosis, Attention Deficit Disorder, stroke, and visual impairment (Equine Therapy, n.d.[b]).

Therapeutic Centers

Various groups, such as the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), provide training and stringent accreditation processes for animal handlers and therapy facilities. The animals utilized during therapy sessions are rigorously selected for and trained prior to being used in the therapy context (NARHA, 2008).

There are several centers for animal assisted therapy in the San Antonio area. The Saddle Light Center in Selma, TX serves Bexar and Comal Counties. As an affiliate of the NARHA, the Saddle Light Center provides horse-assisted therapy to disabled people of all ages, with the help of trained riding instructors and physical therapists (United Way, n.d.). The Horse-Connection, located in Boerne, Texas, was established in 1999 to provide specialized equine-based programs that work privately or with local schools. The Horse-Connection offers private lessons, camps, and hosts fieldtrips for students in the San Antonio area.

The Triple H Equitherapy Center, located in Bandera County, serves as the facility for the 501(c)(3) non-profit organization Horses for the Handicapped, Inc. As a member of the NARHA since 1998, Triple H uses equitherapy to develop and enforce basic life skills for those with mental and emotional disabilities, physical impairment, or limited mobility. Three programs in particular, *Hooves, Hearts and Heroes, From Fear to Responsibility*, as well as *Riding to Independence*, target individuals with mental, emotional, or physical challenges. In addition, Triple H provides financial assistance to their patrons through a sponsorship program that adjusts fees to allow access to all who require it (Horses Helping the Handicapped, n.d.).

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