

How Animals Can Help Traumatized Children

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LIKE MOST PET OWNERS, I have experienced how therapeutic a pet's unconditional love can be during times of stress. It has not surprised me, therefore, to see many organizations, counselors and health care professionals formally recognize that animals can help people with emotional and physical injuries recover faster.

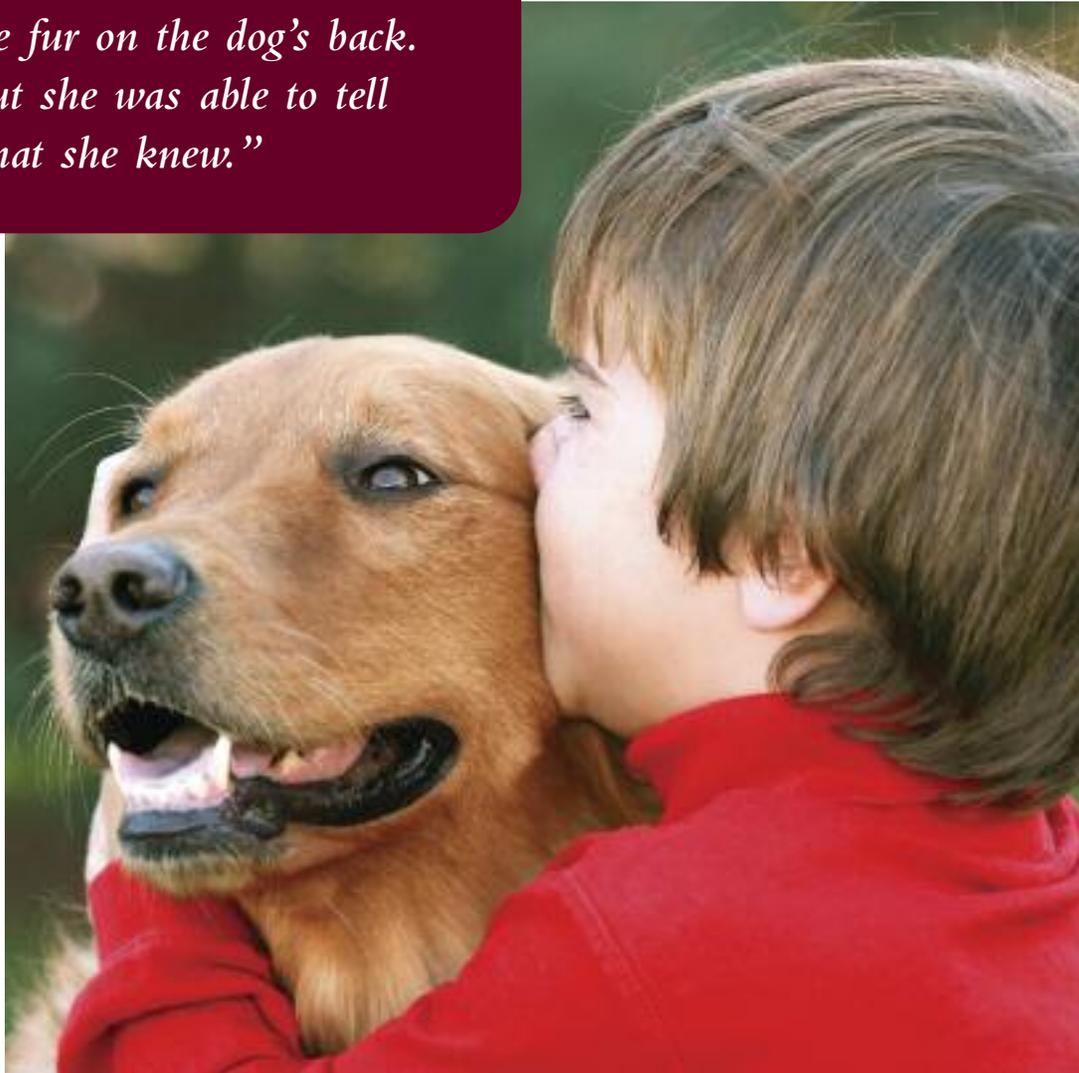
The American Humane Association has long acknowledged the power of the human-animal bond, and currently trains and provides registered therapy animals to help people in need—especially children who have been maltreated or have witnessed trauma. To further support and advance this work, American Humane launched a national initiative at the 21st Annual Crimes Against Children Conference in Dallas, Texas, on August 17, 2009, called the Therapy Animals Supporting Kids (TASK) Program.

As co-creator of the TASK Program, along with American Humane Director of Animal-Assisted Interventions Diana McQuarrie, we hope to provide guidance regarding therapy animals to child welfare professionals, attorneys and prosecutors, child protection workers, social workers, police officers, and any other professionals who work with maltreated children. It is widely accepted that therapy animals can benefit individuals who have suffered physical or emo-



Allie Phillips and Oscar

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tional trauma. The TASK Program takes this concept one step further and encourages child welfare professionals to incorporate therapy animals into sessions with children who have been abused or neglected, or have witnessed violence. When children have suffered trauma, it is often difficult for them to speak of their experiences. Incorporating a therapy animal into the process can help a child open up and promote the healing process.

My partnership with Ms. McQuarrie includes authoring the *American Humane’s TASK Program Manual*, a publication that merges two important areas

of expertise: first, the practical issues involving setting up an animal-assisted therapy program and safely working with therapy animals; and second, the legal implications of effectively incorporating therapy animals in work with children that often entails a difficult court process.

The *TASK Manual* identifies six situations for incorporating therapy animals into work helping traumatized children, and thoroughly details the benefits, drawbacks, and potential legal ramifications involved with each type of situation. The six situations are: Greeting children (at a children’s advocacy center or



Therapy dogs Jake, Chloe and Morgan with Palm Beach County State Attorney Michael McAuliffe

other agency location), the forensic interview or evaluation, the medical examination, individual or group therapy, court preparation and courtroom testimony. The manual features children's advocacy centers and prosecutors' offices that currently incorporate therapy animals to assist children. It also contains sample forms that can be downloaded through the TASK Web page.

The *TASK Manual* was peer-reviewed by nationally recognized leaders in child protection and animal-assisted therapy, as well as agencies that have effectively incorporated therapy animals to benefit child victims and witnesses. The manual has received endorsements from the National Children's Advocacy Center in Huntsville, Alabama; the National Child Protection Training Center in Winona, Minnesota; the State Attorney for the 15th Judicial District in Palm Beach, Florida; and a child psychologist and former director of the Mississippi Children's Advocacy Center in Jackson, Mississippi.

One story featured in the manual comes from the Palm Beach County State Attorney's Office. The office has three registered therapy dogs (Jake, Chloe and Morgan) that help children through the court process.

In one situation, Chloe assisted a child who was so fearful of the process she did not want to testify. Once the child realized that Chloe could accompany her, the child relaxed and was able to testify. According to Lorene Taylor, "She was able to tell the adults what happened. It was not easy. Sometimes she gripped the leash until her fingers turned blue. Sometimes she would only whisper to the dog about what she had seen. They all pretended not to watch while she cried into the fur on the dog's back. But she was able to tell what she knew."

As a former prosecuting attorney, I know firsthand how difficult it can be for a child to climb up to the witness stand and testify about the trauma he or she experienced or saw. Animals, especially trained therapy animals, have an innate ability to comfort and calm children and help them through the court process, often resulting in less trauma and better outcomes for everyone involved.

For more information about the TASK Program, please visit www.americanhumane.org/task, where you can download a complimentary copy of *American Humane's TASK Program Manual*.