

# A touch of animal magic

Supporting engagement and positive attachments was the thinking behind Priestnall School's series of dog-training sessions, as Gareth Morewood explains



**'The children experienced reciprocal bonding and affection with their dog'**

With the current increased focus on mental health for young people, it is important to reinforce the proactive aspect of support as opposed to historic reactive and punitive approaches to presenting behaviour.

I have always tried to find creative ways to support inclusion, with some of my ideas being considered more 'creative' than others; however, the benefits of such unique events provide a lasting memory for young people and, more importantly, can have a long-term impact on their life chances.

## The dog-training course

Priestnall Secondary School in Stockport is a large comprehensive school with a strong inclusive philosophy. Over the summer in 2014 we ran a basic dog obedience and health-care course with a group of eight young people with a parent/carer and their dogs. The group was made up of young people from the nurture group and other vulnerable individuals. The course focused on the following areas:

- ▶ walking to heel
- ▶ learning the sit stay and the down stay
- ▶ checking and grooming the dog
- ▶ a health-care talk from a veterinary surgeon
- ▶ recalls off lead
- ▶ basic agility.

## Outcomes

Participants not only demonstrated an increased interest and enthusiasm in the dogs and the subject, but also developed better listening skills and abilities to communicate with others.

The dogs themselves, at the end of the course, also showed better concentration, social skills and improved obedience which, of course, is credit to the pupils and parents and carers taking part.

## Therapeutic aspect

While delivering the eight sessions we were supported by a psychologist and psychotherapist. Their reflections on the therapeutic aspect of the Dog Training and Animal Assisted Psychotherapy programme were essential to our wider aims of supporting mental health in a proactive manner.

This programme incorporated the use of dog-training techniques, pet care information, canine interaction and experiential therapy. The children experienced interactive emotional control and learned how their emotional states and behaviour affected the behaviour of the dog. Some children had to change dog partners because their behaviour/emotional state did not match the particular animal. This, again, provided a unique learning experience for all involved.

The young people learned how to direct the dog and to take control of their situations through assertiveness and self-focus. Initially, all the children were led by the dogs and felt unable to control the situation, but over the space of five weeks the children all made remarkable progress in assertive leadership of their animal partner. The increase in confidence in the pupils and their canine partners was amazing, and transferred into both school and home life, with the children showing greater self-assurance and a developed sense of being able to communicate appropriately and effectively.

The children experienced reciprocal bonding and affection with their dog through handling, grooming, health care and fun, in addition to developing deeper attachment and more secure bonds with their parents and carers.

## WHAT IS ATTACHMENT?

- ▶ Attachment is an affectionate bond between two individuals that endures through space and time and serves to join them emotionally.
- ▶ Attachment experiences are fundamental to emotional, social, physical and cognitive development.
- ▶ Good early attachments serve to promote resilience to later traumatic (life) experiences.
- ▶ The foundation of attachment is the early main carer/child interaction.
- ▶ Attachment refers to the interaction between a parent and child when the parent:
  - is available to the child
  - is able to understand their needs
  - responds appropriately to meet needs
  - communicates that the child is valued, understood, is able to effect change and is safe.

## Characteristics of negative attachment

- ▶ Inability to regulate emotions (rage, panic, depression, impulsivity).
- ▶ Basic mistrust (if someone is nice, it must be a trick).
- ▶ Low self-esteem/high shame (I am bad, I deserve to be hurt).
- ▶ Need for control (I need to take care of myself, I don't trust/understand others).
- ▶ Learning difficulties (poor concentration and self-belief, dissociation).

## Positive Attachment Cycle



## Negative Attachment Cycle



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Most importantly, the children learned about the necessity of boundaries in their own behaviour and applied boundaries to their dog's behaviour in order to achieve their goals. Some children had the benefit of parent/carer involvement and other children engaged with me as an emotional anchor within the process. Additional intervention from school staff was not necessary within this process, but the benefit of follow-up support in school from staff who were part of the training was powerful in sustaining and developing the skills gained.

This was a profound experience for everyone involved, incorporating an inter-agency approach between the school, the dog trainer, educational psychologist and psychotherapist.

## David's experience

David, one of our students on the autism spectrum in Year 7, thoroughly enjoyed the sessions, as did his mum! David enjoyed getting to know the other dogs, and then the next day telling his form tutor and peers all about it. The interest from other students in David's animated stories about the sessions was even more powerful, as verbal interaction and reciprocal communication had previously been virtually non-existent.

## Replicated for transition

Many may consider this programme to be a real luxury. However, the outcomes directly related to the sessions for individual students, their dogs and the parents and carers have been immense. At relatively low cost – £100 per session – eight young people and their parents and carers enjoyed outstanding outcomes. We were also able to replicate the sessions as part of transition events for Year 6 students to provide a really unique start to their time at secondary school.

Ultimately, given the increased focus on mental health since September 2014, unique events like this help to reduce associated risks to mental health and ensure that vulnerable young people have a chance to be more included.

The training was delivered and supported by:

- ▶ Damian Riley, dog behaviourist and trainer
- ▶ Dr Margaret Bullock, psychologist
- ▶ Julie Stirpe, psychotherapist.

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