

10-1-2002

4-H Animal Care as Therapy for At-Risk Youth

Randy R. Weigel

University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension, weig@uwyp.edu

Brenda Caiola

The Wyoming Girls School

Lise Pittman-Foy

University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Weigel, R. R., Caiola, B., & Pittman-Foy, L. (2002). 4-H Animal Care as Therapy for At-Risk Youth. *The Journal of Extension*, 40(5), Article 20. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol40/iss5/20>

This Ideas at Work is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.



October 2002 // Volume 40 // Number 5 // Ideas at Work // 5IAW6



PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE

4-H Animal Care as Therapy for At-Risk Youth

Abstract

Encouraging nurturing traits through the interaction of animals and at-risk youth can help reduce antisocial behavior. A 4-H animal-care program was initiated at The Wyoming Girls School as part of the rehabilitation process for the School's residents. Self-assessments by the young women indicated that the animals served a therapeutic role. Supervised interaction between at-risk youth and animals can provide an avenue to enhance self-esteem and build positive coping behaviors.

Randy R. Weigel

Associate Professor and Extension Specialist
University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service
Laramie, Wyoming
Internet Address: weig@uwyo.edu

Brenda Caiola

Educational Staff
The Wyoming Girls School
Sheridan, Wyoming

Lise Pittman-Foy

4-H Program Associate
University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service
Sheridan County

Introduction

Animals have long provided positive benefits to individuals in a variety of situations, such as hospital patients, nursing home residents, prison inmates, and disabled individuals (All, Loving, & Crane, 1999). Animals can also play an important role in adolescent development. As a source of love, companionship, and responsibility, animals can help smooth the transition from childhood through adolescence to young adulthood.

Robin tenBensal, Quigley, and Anderson (1983) indicated that animals might have special meaning to children and youth who are at-risk emotionally, socially, or behaviorally. These young people often have poor self-esteem and difficulty maintaining relationships. Many have suffered abuse or neglect from parents or caretakers.

A dynamic in abused children and youth is identification with their aggression. Youth may either believe they are at fault for the abuse, or they may transfer this abusive behavior toward others. Edney (1995) believes that encouraging nurturing traits through the careful introduction of companion animals may reduce antisocial behavior in young people. To capitalize on the potential benefits of connecting animals with at-risk youth, a 4-H animal-care program was developed at The Wyoming Girls School.

Program Description

The Wyoming Girls School (WGS) is a state residential childcare facility located in Sheridan, Wyoming. The students are 12- to 18-year-old girls who have been court ordered to the facility for rehabilitation as a result of inappropriate, delinquent behavior or offenses.

Funding for the program was provided through the Children, Youth, and Families-at-Risk Initiative,

local foundations, Sheridan County Extension, and area ranchers. The animal-care program included miniature horses, llamas, goats, cattle, and rabbits. The variety in projects was specifically designed to match residents' interest and comfort, and increase the number of residents who could benefit from participation in this 4-H activity.

Participation in the projects carried high expectations and responsibility. The students were responsible for the daily care of their animals, including feeding, cleaning, gentling, grooming, and training, as well as completing a daily responsibility chart. In some instances, the animals came to the program in a wild or nearly wild state. For example, in the miniature horse project, some of the horses had to first be broken by the staff and students before gentling, grooming, and training could begin.

For many of the students, this was their first experience with this level of responsibility. Though not all participants were able to rise to the expectations, many did and experienced positive growth.

Therapeutic Value

The Girls School residents, in self-assessments of their 4-H experience, reported that their animals provided a therapeutic effect by serving as teacher, listener, comforter, distracter, and friend.

Animals as Teacher

Working with the animals taught the residents valuable life skills. As the students observed, even though the animals were "corrected" as they were being trained, the animals continued to work with the students. The students were able to see and learn from a situation where animals were corrected in behavior and still loved. There were reports that the animals helped the students in their self-awareness.

"My bunny Licorice has helped me to know that I am going to make it as a parent some day. I have a pretty big issue with abuse and my biggest fear is someday treating my kids the way I was treated. Licorice taught me ways I can handle myself when I get upset at what he does." (WGS resident, age 16).

Animals as Listener

Throughout their lives, many of these residents have learned that it is dangerous to talk to others. Communication involves the risks of ridicule, sarcasm, criticism, and vindictiveness. However, there were reports by many of the young women that their animals seemed to listen; they provided unconditional, empathetic non-verbal feedback and were a good sounding board as the students worked through personal issues.

"Whenever I am sad or angry my rabbit is something I can go to and hold and my rabbit doesn't criticize me like people I know. He is just silent and calm." (WGS resident, age 15).

Animals as Comforter

Grooming animals has a therapeutic effect for many people. Several of the residents come from families where positive emotions, hugs, and comfort are not expressed. Grooming the animals allowed the students to feel and touch in a calming way. Grooming the soft fur of the rabbits or shiny coat of the horses was comforting to many of the students:

"I get a sense of comfort when I have a soft rabbit to hold. Instead of going to guys to comfort and hold me, I can cuddle with my bunny when I'm down." (WGS resident, age 14).

Animals as Distraction

The Girls School treatment plan for the residents included dealing with personal issues. Training animals allowed the students to focus on the present moment and provided a temporary distraction to the stress, pain, and anxiety they were experiencing.

"I wanted to learn patience and working with my horse, but having love in my heart for him got me to this point today. I am so proud of him and myself as well. Everyday I go down there and he's waiting at the gate looking right at me just waiting to get out and try new things. Even though fair never happened, he would have won and I know that because he's my champion." (WGS resident, age 17).

Animals as Friend

A term repeated frequently in the assessments of the residents was that their animals were "friends." In an environment where the young women were dealing with problems of trust and broken relationships, the animals provided unconditional, uncompromising friendship.

The residents often gave human-like qualities to this friendship: "someone I could talk to," "someone I could hold," "someone who would listen." One student summed up the importance of this friendship:

"The bunny program has benefited me in many ways. Most of all it gave me a friend. When I was struggling I was able to go out there and hold it and even sing to her. It was really comforting to know that she was there to help make me feel good. It was also a good feeling because she relied on me. I have really never been needed and she needed me. She counted on me to give her food, water, and attention." (WGS resident, age 16).

Implications

Those who have worked with animals and 4-H know well their value in the physical, emotional, and psychosocial development of children and youth. But for many at-risk youth, interacting with animals is a new experience and one that appears to have therapeutic value.

The long-term benefit of this 4-H animal-care program in the lives of the at-risk youth is unclear. But by the time many at-risk youth reach adolescence, their ability to connect with others has become weakened or absent. The challenge for adults, teachers, leaders, and mental health professionals working with at-risk youth is finding ways to help build confidence, self-esteem, and trust. Supervised interaction with animals can serve as a powerful way to open many "closed doors" and pave the way for dramatic breakthroughs.

References

All, A., Loving, G., & Crane, L. (1999). Animals, horseback riding, and implications for rehabilitation therapy. *National Rehabilitation Association*.

Edney, A. (1995). Companion animals and human health: An overview. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*. 88(12), 704p-708p.

Robin, M., tenBensal, R., Quigley, J., & Anderson, R. (1983). Childhood pets and the psychosocial development of adolescents. In A. Katcher & A. Beck, (Eds.), *New perspectives in our lives with companion animals* (pp. 436-443). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Copyright © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the [Journal Editorial Office, joe-ed@joe.org](mailto:joe-ed@joe.org).

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)