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For Autistic Children, Therapy on Four Legs



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

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SHADOW, a black Labrador retriever, knows how to interact with people without overreacting to them — a necessity for a well-trained therapy dog, said her owner and handler, Ani Shaker.

Considered “bombproof,” meaning she will remain calm in nearly any situation, Shadow, and Ms. Shaker, volunteer at the [Anderson Center for Autism](#) in Staatsburg, N.Y., in the Hudson Valley north of New York City.

“As soon as I get her working vest out, she jumps up and her little tail starts wagging,” Ms. Shaker said. “She loves the work. That’s what she lives for, and I can tell she knows she is helping someone else feel good.”

Shadow and Ms. Shaker, an equestrian trainer, are one of six teams that have been volunteering at the Anderson Center for two years. They are part of the [Good Dog Foundation](#), a nonprofit based in New York that provides therapy services throughout the East Coast.

Unlike service dogs who live 24/7 with people with disabilities, therapy dogs visit treatment centers and residential schools. The Good Dog teams go through a nine-week training course, said Susan Fireman, executive trainer and program coordinator for upstate New York, the Berkshires in Massachusetts and Litchfield County, Conn. “These dogs have to be very calm and be able to absorb a certain amount of stress without becoming stressed themselves,” she said.

One in every 110 children in the United States has an [autism](#) spectrum disorder, with autism disorder being the most commonly recognized subtype, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Children with autism have mild to severe degrees of difficulty with social, communication and emotional skills. It is usually a lifelong disability with no definitive cause or cure. Autism, which is classified as a developmental disability, is four times more likely to occur in boys.

“We are hearing more and more from families we serve that therapy dogs have had an overall positive effect on their children,” said Marguerite Colston, vice president of constituent relations at the Autism Society, a national grassroots organization.

Because each person with autism experiences it differently, there is no certainty a therapy dog will help, she said, but for certain individuals, a dog “has eased their anxiety and has even helped some to open up to others, as individuals with autism are typically more withdrawn and less likely to socialize.”

The Anderson Center is a year-round residence and school for children and young adults ages 5 to 21 with moderate to severe symptoms, said Dr. Austin Rynne, its director of health and related services. “The children we serve here cannot be served in their own school district,” he said. “They cannot work and have difficulty being managed at home.”

Dr. Rynne said he incorporated the dogs into the curriculum two years ago, not as a playful diversion but to determine whether they could help the educational process.

“We are not trying to make these kids become dog lovers,” he said. “We want to use the dogs as a medium to achieve our pre-existing educational goals.”

Because many children with autism tend to inhabit a private inner world, constructing a bridge to that world is essential, said Dr. Rynne. He said the therapy-dog program was doing just that with some students.

One 11-year-old boy, who has been at the Anderson Center for three years, is nonverbal and makes requests by pointing to pictures (yes, no, bathroom, toys, food and so on). When he was first introduced to Shadow a year ago, he refused to enter the room with her and would run away if she looked at him.

Now, he requests the opportunity to walk, pet and feed Shadow, and the interaction helps him develop communication skills that can be transferred to relationships with peers and teachers, Dr. Rynne said.

And when this boy becomes frustrated and throws a tantrum, Shadow’s calming presence seems to help him regain his self-control, he added.

Dutchess, a golden retriever who loves people, tennis balls and treats, was “born to be a therapy dog,” said her owner and handler, Mark Condon, a biology professor at Dutchess Community College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Dutchess, who was also trained by the Good Dog Foundation, and Professor Condon have been volunteering at Anderson since August 2009.

One of their students is a 16-year-old boy who has verbal and aggression problems, said Courtney Peggs, an occupational therapist assistant who works with them. Before his therapy with Dutchess, the boy relied on caregivers or teachers to lead his social interaction, a condition called prompt-dependent. Now, she said, the boy is becoming more functionally independent.

Miss Peggs prepares for a dog-therapy session by arranging tennis balls, treats, a pet brush and a water container in the auditorium. The boy “knows he has to come to me to make the request of which object to choose,” she said.

Once the boy is given the O.K., he takes the object to Dutchess, to their mutual delight. “I have seen him carry over what he has done with Dutchess independently,” she said. “It’s been amazing.”

Professor Condon said he believed strongly in the power of the human-canine connection and that Dutchess provided the boy unique assistance.

Professor Condon observed that the boy “just evens out when Dutchess is around, adding: “Some days he seems to be somewhere else, but he likes her so much that he temporarily leaves that place to be with her. That force is stronger.”

Elizabeth Olson, an education specialist at Hope Elementary School in Carlsbad, Calif., teaches students with moderate to severe autism in grades kindergarten through third. Her yellow Labrador retriever mix, Yori, has joined her in the classroom this semester and is a big hit, she said.

She said Yori, who was trained by the [Canine Companions for Independence](#), a nonprofit that provides assistance dogs for people with a range of disabilities, helped bridge the communication barrier in her classroom.

“My students are all functionally nonverbal,” she said. “They are very content as a whole not to speak, but they want to speak to Yori. There is one student who I spent years trying to teach to say hello and goodbye. Then one day he started saying hello and goodbye to Yori. Soon he said it to me, and now he does it with his fellow students.”

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