

“It takes me a little longer to get angry now”: Homeless children traumatised by family violence reflect on an animal therapy group

Neerosh Mudaly,¹ Amanda Graham² and Nerys Lewis³

¹Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia, Monash Injury Research Institute, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria, Australia

²WAYSS Ltd, Dandenong, Victoria, Australia

³Empathy Education & Training, Monash University, Glen Waverley, Victoria, Australia

Children who experience ongoing abuse, violence and homelessness often develop social, emotional, health and behavioural problems which are frequently manifested in trauma-based behaviours including self harming and suicidal behaviours, aggressive and criminal behaviours, and drug and alcohol problems. These children often do not engage with traditional therapeutic services. Their persistent fear associated with fleeing the violence and their subsequent transient living situations prevents them from engaging with professionals.

An innovative therapeutic program using animals in an activity based group setting was implemented by a family violence housing and support agency to engage these children. As part of its commitment to improving responses to children this agency funded a preliminary, independent evaluation of the program.

The objective of this evaluation was to obtain feedback from the children who had attended the group on their experiences of the animal therapy group. This paper reports on the children’s views of the benefits of the group.

“... and when we’re holding the animals, makes you feel more calmer and stuff” (13-year-old girl)

■ **Keywords:** children, homelessness, family violence, animal assisted therapy

Introduction

This article reports on a preliminary evaluation of an animal-assisted education and therapy (AAET) group that aimed to obtain feedback from children who were recipients of this new therapeutic intervention (the term ‘children’ is used for convenience throughout this article to refer to both children and young people). What children have to say about services set up for them is essential for improving service delivery (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Clavering & McLaughlin, 2010; McGee, 2000; Mudaly & Goddard, 2006). The evaluation was commissioned by a family violence agency to assess the effectiveness of its innovative AAET group introduced for homeless children affected by family violence. The article features the voices of the children who participated in the evaluation and who had attended the group.

Background

Children who experience traumatic events early in life which involve ongoing incidents of abuse and violence often de-

velop severe social, emotional, health and behavioural problems (Goddard & Bedi, 2010; Levensdosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Thompson & Tabone, 2010). Children who become homeless as a result of fleeing family violence fall into this category and display ‘significant problems’ in many areas of their development (Kirkman, Keys, Turner, & Bodzak, 2009, p. 11).

Mothers who escape family violence are assisted by Australia’s Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) which is the major service provider for homelessness (Kirkman et al., 2009). Thousands of children accompany their mothers. The effects on these children of having lived with family violence and the consequent homelessness from escaping such violence are extreme. Frequently, these

ADDRESSES FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Dr Neerosh Mudaly, Senior Research Fellow, Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia, Monash Injury Research Institute, Monash University, Building 70, Wellington Rd, Clayton, Victoria, 3008, Australia. E-mail: neerosh.mudaly@monash.edu

children present with serious emotional and behavioural issues as a direct result of the violence perpetrated on them, their mothers and their pets (Kitzmann, 2012; Mudaly, 2010). These children require sensitive therapeutic interventions as their emotional and behavioural problems preclude them from accessing and engaging with healing interventions. Effective therapeutic interventions are based on the key elements of emotional and physical security and stability of care which are lacking for these children (Mudaly, 2010). Their persisting fear and anxiety, coupled with uncertainty about their future, also impairs their ability to engage with traditional therapeutic interventions (Perry & Hambrick, 2008). Unfortunately, specialised services that target the specific needs of these children are not available as SAAP services are not designed to meet these needs (Kirkman et al., 2009).

An innovative animal-assisted therapy group was implemented by a homelessness and family violence agency in Melbourne, Australia, in response to the particular needs of the children who accessed their services.

Animal-assisted programmes are becoming recognised as a relevant and valuable therapeutic intervention for humans, and have been used successfully in a range of adult and child mental health programmes (Chandler, 2005; Chandler, Portie-Bethke, Barrio Minton, Fernando, & O'Callaghan, 2010; Friesen, 2010). Animals are particularly helpful for children who demonstrate challenging behaviours due to experiences of abuse and violence (Ascione, 2005; Parish-Plass, 2008). Melson and Fine (2006) cite studies which state that children sought emotional support, comfort and reassurance from their pets during times of stress.

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a therapeutic approach that is considered an adjunct to therapy. It encourages and facilitates client motivation and participation, enhances the client–therapist relationship and reinforces positive client change (Chandler, 2005). AAT is differentiated from animal-assisted activities or education as it incorporates ‘emotional connection and relationship’ between therapist, child and animal (Parish-Plass, 2008, p. 12). The delivery of AAT programmes depend on the animal that is involved (e.g. a dog or horse), the setting in which it is delivered (e.g. inpatient or outpatient setting, medical clinic), the duration of the intervention (short or long term), and whether the intervention is delivered in a group or individual format (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007).

For the programme under discussion, the agency partnered with an animal therapy consultancy specialising in the design and delivery of animal assisted programmes for children experiencing violence and abuse, neglect and homelessness (Empathy Education & Training, 2007). A joint therapeutic model using small animals in a group setting, and supported by the family violence agency's internal case management process, was established in 2005.

From anecdotal evidence of children attending this group, dramatic improvements were noted in many areas

of their lives. A formal pilot evaluation of this programme on its effectiveness as a therapeutic response for this population of children was therefore commissioned. The aim was to seek the views of children about the benefits of this group.

Details of the Pilot Evaluation

Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia is a university-based research centre, which was commissioned by the family violence agency to undertake the pilot evaluation. Ethically sound research that promotes children's voices is a fundamental aim of this research centre (see <http://www.capra.monash.org>).

Evaluation is a critical element for sustaining child abuse prevention programmes and is essential for ongoing quality assurance efforts, accountability and obtaining evidence of effectiveness of interventions (Gelles, 2000; Taylor-Powell, Steele, & Douglah, 1996). As the animal therapy group had been operating for several years, the agency felt it important to evaluate its effectiveness in meeting the children's needs. The chief aim was to obtain children's views on the group in order to plan expansion of the programme.

A qualitative methodology was chosen for the evaluation as it allowed the children to give their own views, in their own voices, in an interactive dialogue with the researcher (Berg, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Mudaly, 2002). The research process used a child-centred approach for obtaining consent, providing information on the research, addressing confidentiality issues, and engaging and supporting the children during and after the research (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Bray & Pugh, 1997; Mudaly, 2002; Mudaly & Goddard, 2006, 2009). Ethics approval to conduct the pilot evaluation was obtained through Monash University's Human Research Ethics Committee, with criteria set to minimise any possible risks to children who consented to participate (Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Mudaly, 2002, 2010; Mudaly & Goddard, 2006, 2009). The Animal Ethics Committee of the local animal welfare agency oversaw the welfare of the animals involved in the programme.

Children's Experiences of Family Violence and Homelessness

Every year, thousands of children in the company of their mothers become homeless, often as a result of family violence. The 2006–2007 SAAP data revealed that 69,100 children accompanied mothers who were part of SAAP-funded services in Australia. Of this number, 21,400 children were from Victoria (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009). For these children, living with and then fleeing family violence, and enduring the loss of their homes, possessions, pets, neighbourhood resources, schools and friends, has an extremely damaging impact on their development. ‘Homelessness is the extreme point of poverty and instability’ as it aggravates the adverse effects of pre-existing circumstances

on children's development including behaviour and academic performance (Kirkman et al., 2009, p. 11). Current literature maintains that pets are also often included in the violence as they 'are an important part of many families' (Hounslow, Johnson, Kathan, & Pond, 2010, p. 11). Children may be forced to observe or participate in violence to pets to procure their compliance. Such experiences, coupled with the consequent homelessness, exacerbate the impact on children's development.

The Need for a Specialised Therapeutic Programme

The need for a specific focus on the needs of these children was identified and stated in the Government's white paper on reducing homelessness (Kirkman et al., 2009). It was in this context that the animal therapy programme was developed by the family violence agency for the children accessing its services.

As part of the agency's intervention, parents and children are placed in short-term, supported accommodation, with children from this target group selected to participate in the group. The aim is to assist them to achieve a measure of emotional security and prepare them for engaging with counselling services. Children's entry into the group is carefully assessed and planned according to their individual needs (for example, if they require additional support prior to entry), as well as matching them with the age range and dynamics of children already in the group.

Assessment of the children for the group is undertaken by the agency through the children's caseworkers, who also provide ongoing case-management support to the children. Where there is a known history of a child's cruelty to or fear of animals, he or she is not precluded from the group, but carefully prepared for, and more closely supported, in the group. This may include a graduated process of contact with the animals. The comprehensive assessment also identifies and responds to each child's educational, health, cultural, social and emotional needs.

The Animal-Assisted Education and Therapy (AAET) Group

The animal therapy consultancy provides the participating animals and ensures that the animals' health and welfare are given priority at all times. The animals chosen for the programme include guinea-pigs, rabbits and rats (Empathy Education & Training, 2007). These small animals are specifically chosen for the group for several reasons. Many children who have lived with family violence may be afraid of larger animals or may perceive some animals as fierce, for example, larger dogs. Small animals are also not able to inflict any great damage on anyone. In addition, the parallels between small, vulnerable animals and children's vulnerability within violent families are also profound. The perception that guinea-pigs are small, vulnerable, fragile and

needy, and therefore require care and protection (Gurney, 1999), encourages children to connect with their own empathic qualities.

The welfare of the animals is a priority (Fredrickson-MacNamara & Butler, 2006). This is not restricted to medical care, training and health certification. Empathy Education & Training (EE&T) stipulate that healing interactions between the children and animals can only occur when the animals are stress-free, healthy and relaxed within the therapeutic environment (Melson & Fine, 2006). Priority is therefore given to protecting the animals from any stress and they are removed if a situation becomes overly stressful. The animals are also constantly monitored for their responses in the group and are 'retired' when assessed as not being comfortable any longer in the group (Fredrickson-MacNamara & Butler, 2006, p. 140). Significant effort is spent on caring for, and preparing, the animals for the group. Group sessions are held on the grounds of an animal shelter and run by staff of the animal therapy consultancy. The children's caseworker transports the children to and from the group, and also facilitates the group, which is held during school terms.

Eight to ten children attend weekly group sessions of 1.5 hours' duration. There is a repeated framework of activities, which provides routine and safety, but allows considerable flexibility for responding to individual children and their needs. Activities are designed to engage with children and settle them in preparation for contact with the animals. Individual and group activities include art and photography, and shared refreshments. Animal activities include education about animal health, diet, husbandry and welfare, animal handling (grooming, comforting) and animal care (feeding and observation). The adult facilitators provide supervision, knowledge and companionship for the children (Empathy Education & Training, 2007). The group provides opportunities for children to experience positive interactions with animals and adults to counter the damage from experiences of violence, displacement and uncertainty (Ascione, 2005).

Details of the Research Sample

Eleven children (six boys and five girls) from seven families eventually consented to participate in the evaluation. Recruiting children from this population for a research sample is fraught with difficulties. The lives of most of these families are unpredictable, unsafe and filled with crises and ongoing fear. These issues impact on their availability and accessibility, creating difficulties in securing a definitive research sample (Kirkman et al., 2009; Mudaly, 2010). The children's ages ranged from 7 to 15 years, and attendance at the group ranged from 8 to 24 group sessions, with the average being 15. Three children attended group sessions for over 3 years in a fragmented manner. For eight children, the biological father had been the violent offender and for three children, it had been the mother's partner.

The violence and homelessness experienced by these children had been extensive. It included physical and, for some, sexual abuse, threats of physical abuse to them, being terrorized with threats to kill their mothers and their pets, being stalked and held hostage with their mothers, and destruction of their belongings. All the children had left their known family home and none of them had returned to live in the same property. Some children had stayed in more than one women's refuge and all had spent several nights in a motel at some point in their homelessness experience.

At entry to the group, the children were described by their mothers (and observed by the caseworkers) as displaying a variety of traumatised behaviours. Eight children were described as displaying aggressive behaviours, which included being physically violent with siblings and at school, fighting, bullying, being angry all the time and argumentative. Three children were described as displaying withdrawn behaviours. This included high levels of anxiety, distress, acute sensitivity, running away, hiding and not talking (one child became mute until she attended the group). Being bullied, over-talking, tantrums and constant attention-seeking were other behaviours exhibited by the children.

Children's Voices

There is growing acceptance of the importance and value of hearing directly from children about matters that affect them (Christensen, 2004; Clavering & McLaughlin, 2010; Mudaly & Goddard, 2006). The quotes and extracts presented here have been taken directly from the pilot research interviews, during which children chose to speak on these topics (Mudaly, 2010). Therefore, they do not represent the experiences of all the children who participated in the evaluation. The children's voices are presented without theoretical or author interpretation. The quotes, although random, were selected for relevance to the topics under discussion.

Children's Views about Themselves

Views about themselves prior to group attendance. Many children described what they were like before attending the group. Several talked about being angry:

"I used to be like an angry little boy sometimes . . . because I used to get angry a lot . . . I just let it out, like full on let it out. Scream and all that . . . I've got heaps of memories. Too much." (14-year-old boy)

"Yeah, it may have been because I was a little bit angry in those days. I wanted to kill myself sometimes." (15-year-old boy)

"I was an angry person around like Prep and Grade 1. I was very sensitive and I tried to hide that by pretending to be tough and stuff like that, putting on an act. I was really cocky and think I could fight and take down anyone, and I would take on people way bigger than me, and I'd win sometimes and other times I would get the crap beaten out of me." (14-year-old boy)

Others described themselves as quiet, shy and not able to connect with the other kids:

"When I was in the group I was really quiet and didn't talk to anyone that much." (15-year-old boy)

"Like I had trouble meeting people, like making friends." (13-year-old girl)

Some talked about being scared:

"Yeah, like when I was younger I used to basically not talk to anyone because I was scared of pretty much anyone and everything. So I'd just huddle in my little corner, or in my bedroom and just . . . yep talk to myself." (14-year-old boy)

"Well, I was pretty much scared of people before I went back in there (the group), and I was scared of guinea-pigs . . ." (14-year-old boy)

Views about themselves after group attendance. Several children talked about feeling less angry and being less aggressive:

". . . and then after the group I was more positive on life and everything." (13-year-old girl)

"It takes me a little bit longer to get angry now. I am a friendly person now . . ." (14-year-old boy)

Children also described how they had changed as a result of attending the group. Many described gaining in confidence:

"How it changed me? I used to be like more of a shyer person type thing. And when I started going there, started talking to everyone and . . . probably gave me more confidence about myself." (14-year-old boy)

"I'm more confident and more safer around the animals." (13-year-old girl)

Some talked about developing friendships:

"It was fun. I made some friends . . ." (9-year-old boy)

". . . and now? I'm independent. Yeah, but now I talk to everyone, I hang around with everyone. Yeah, and now I'm popular and everyone likes me and I talk to everyone . . . I think it's because of the group, because I learnt how to talk to everyone there and make friends." (15-year-old boy)

A few children talked about growing up and feeling more prepared for the challenges in their lives:

"I already plan my next moves if something happens yeah. I don't really have to try to think about things. I just do it . . . Yes. Like if I am playing chess I will go 5 moves ahead than what I am already on . . ." (14-year-old boy)

"I feel grown up. I feel like I'm grown up. I don't need my big one (teddy bear) anymore." (8-year-old boy)

Children's Views on the Animals

Many talked about the animals and what they had learnt about animals:

"[I learnt] How to care for them, to help them feel relaxed and stuff like that. And how you treat them. And sometimes like when you're scared they're scared too. [You can tell from] their actions, their eyes and just sometimes they don't eat when they're scared. Yeah, like to comfort them and just help

them be more relaxed and know that you're not going to hurt them." (12-year-old boy)

"Ahh they teach me a lot...you have to like, give them... food and like go next to their family and they get used to you. And they won't like keep going out and running away." (8-year-old boy)

Many participants developed much insight and knowledge about animal behaviour:

"You can sit very still or stand still. Because if you don't stand very still... er... they won't come to you. Yeah, I give him a pat like that, and I just umm they fall asleep and I talk quietly." (7-year-old girl)

"I can tell if a dog's happy, if its tail's wagging... [when he's scared] you can feel he's vibrating." (9-year-old boy)

"Probably learning what the animals like, their favourite food, the way you hold them. Like if they like brushing on the head or underneath them or... the more you play with them and stuff, like you work it out... they're safe... you know they're happy." (13-year-old girl)

"Some get frightened easy, and some are good. [They] try to run away [when they are scared] Yeah. They're like – Yeah you hear them squeak, or squeal... you feed them and pat them, comfort them." (14-year-old boy)

"When something's really noisy, they were very scared so they get in, they get in, get all squashed. Umm, I have to go to them and say 't's okay' and get my favourite guinea-pig and I hug him." (7-year-old girl)

Several talked about what it felt like to respond to an animal's need for comfort and safety:

"And also when we're holding the animals, makes you feel more calmer and stuff." (13-year-old girl)

"And guess what? I used to, umm, keep them asleep. I used to pat them very nicely and I fell them asleep. It made me feel good." (7-year-old girl)

"Yes. It feels really warm and safe. It makes you feel good as well. You can tell that they are feeling safe and... It's like painting a room and saying 'oh God I just did that, that felt so good.' It's like taking a kid to college and watching them graduate." (14-year-old boy)

Children's Views on the Group

Many children said they loved the many aspects of the group:

"It was fun for kids, for all kids." (7-year-old girl)

"Yeah it was pretty fun. The animals, everyone was pretty friendly and... And I was like oh yes I can't wait until Wednesday." (12-year-old girl)

"Yeah, the kids all love it, any kid, 15, 12... Yes I love that group. I love it." (15-year-old boy)

Others talked about the value of the group:

"Yeah it's been one of the best groups ever. And it's really good how it will help kids and help them grow up... like animals won't hurt them and humans will help them and then they

will help us. Like animals, like a dog, they can help you if you're upset, they can make you happy." (15-year-old boy)

"Because to get them [the kids] away from troubles and meet new and interesting people. Get interactive with families. Learn some new stuff." (14-year-old girl)

Discussion

Current literature contends that children growing up with abuse and violence may lose the capacity to connect with and develop relationships with people – a key feature to functioning in society (Perry, 2001). This view is confirmed by children in the study, many of whom described their difficulty in making friends and being scared of talking with anyone. They also attributed their later ability to connect with others and gaining in confidence to the group programme. Most animal-assisted programmes are based on the premise that positive interactions with animals can be a bridge to improved interactions with humans (Melson & Fine, 2006).

For many children who experience family violence, the development of empathy is impaired. Empathy, 'the capacity to sense the inner state of another person' (Hanson, 2009, p. 125), is linked to early childhood experiences of care-giving. Safe, supportive relationships involved in secure attachments 'creates an optimal environment for social and emotional learning' (Cozolino, 2010, p. 46). A deficient empathy system affects the ability to live with and be close to other people, and ultimately to live and function in this world. Pets frequently function as attachment figures for children, giving them 'a sense of reassurance, calm and security' (Melson & Fine, 2006, p. 213). Interactions with small animals also trigger nurture and trust (Birmelin, 2001).

By teaching children to understand animals' feelings and needs, traumatised children can learn to show empathy towards animals and people. Children described the empathy they experienced in comforting scared and frightened animals. O'Haire (2010b), in reporting on a study on the use of guinea-pigs in the classroom, remarks on the improvements in the participating children's 'social functioning, including self-confidence, empathy, nurturing skills, and emotional well being' (p. 13).

Conclusion

The pilot evaluation confirmed anecdotal evidence that children experienced the group as beneficial to them. For some children there was a dramatic change. For example, prior to attending the group the 7-year-old girl cited in this article had become an elective mute as a direct result of the extreme violence she had experienced. She resumed verbal communication after several group sessions when she spoke her first words to an animal in the group.

The pilot evaluation also pointed to the need for a rigorous, empirical study. Children who experience violence in their homes learn that violence is an acceptable

way to resolve conflict and for expressing anger (Howard, Rottem, & Friend, 2008; Kitzmann, 2007). Programmes that help children learn to express anger in constructive ways may intervene 'in the cycle of violence' (Hounslow et al., 2010, p. 14). An in-depth, comprehensive evaluation is planned. Research interviews with children attending the programme, their supportive parent, teachers and caseworkers will be merged with psychometric trauma and empathy measures administered before and after group attendance. It is envisaged that this data will yield 'concrete, measurable results' on the effectiveness of animal-assisted interventions (O'Haire, 2010a, p. 232).

Funding is being sought to conduct a rigorous 2-year evaluation.

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