

Spring 2016

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Recommended Citation

McCormack, Jessica (2016) "Benefit of Animal-assisted Therapy Programs in Prison," *ESSAI*: Vol. 14 , Article 27.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol14/iss1/27>

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Benefit of Animal-assisted Therapy Programs in Prison

by Jessica McCormack

(English 1102)

In 1975, the first animal-assisted therapy program started by accident, “when an inmate at the Lima State Hospital in Ohio adopted an injured sparrow” (Britton and Button, 81). As the staff saw the dramatic change in all the inmates’ behavior, they decided to allow animal therapy programs. This was the perfect beginning for animal-assisted therapy programs to make a good reputation for themselves. “Working with animals provides meaningful experiences for incarcerated individuals during which many important life lessons are learned” (Deaton 47). The positive impact animals provide to the inmate population is hard to go unnoticed, through the use of animal-assisted therapy programs.

According to Deborah Wells, who received her doctorate on the welfare of kennel dogs in 2006 from Queens University in Belfast, the use of dogs in various settings and the benefits that come along with the canines using their ability to detect anything we train them to and to protect us is beneficial in institutional settings. Touching on hospital settings, nursing homes and prisons, there are benefits for each, as Wells suggests. While stating that some prisons are reluctant to the idea of dogs joining their strict schedules, Wells claims that the benefits are outstanding and are going to become more common in prisons everywhere: “Similar to those residing in other institutions, prison inmates can suffer from loneliness, denied responsibility, and low self-worth” (151). Animal-assisted therapy programs offer a low-cost alternative to medication, in that it can serve to socialize inmates, raise their self-esteem, and give them a sense of responsibility. The public tends to view inmates as “anti-social monsters, incapable of doing anything positive” (Britton and Button, 82).

Project Pooch is another such animal-assisted therapy program, but one done with incarcerated youths. In a three-year study by Dr. Sandra Merriam-Arduini, her findings showed that this youth program elicited behavior improvements, especially in the areas of respect for authority, social interaction, and leadership. Merriam-Arduini explains that those who “completed the program showed improvements in the areas of honesty, empathy, nurturing, social growth, self-confidence and pride of accomplishment” (Deaton 55). These are both positive results, leading us to ask what motivates the prisoners to want to participate in the program.¹

The biggest motivator for the prisoners’ response to these animal-assisted programs is their love for the animal—in particular, the dogs. Most prisoners before coming to prison “had owned dogs, and enjoyed spending time with them” (Britton and Button, 85). The next most motivating factor was the freedom the prisoners who participated in the program were allowed. It gave them the opportunity to be outside more with their dog. One prisoner explained that, “It’s company for me. I can get away from the other inmates, and the noise and stupidity” (qtd. in Britton and Button, 86). Other data collected included motivators of keeping busy, and giving back to the community (and therapy), to name a few. The most significant motivator for these prisoners was the ability it gave them to somehow give back for the wrongs they had committed. One inmate stated during an interview that, “I look at it like this: if I’ve taken so much from the community, I’ve done the drug selling, I’ve been involved in the gang shootings, I’ve done the a few robberies, and whatnot...,” but then he took a turn and said, “now, I’m taking this as an opportunity to give back to the community because this dog is going to be used to help somebody else. It is going to be used to help a handicapped person, so I’m taking this time to just give back what I’ve taken out” (qtd. in Britton and Button, 86).

Success does not come without challenges in the program. The pressure from high surveillance, possible mistreatment of the dogs, and the fact that the dogs are temporary are a few challenges the inmates face when entering the program. Inmates who participate in these programs are “subject to a much higher level of scrutiny from staff, and other inmates, and may themselves face risks if harm comes to the animal” (Britton and Button, 82). As in any animal-assisted program, handling of and giving commands to the dog should be done only by the dog’s handler. Also, the particular dog that is being trained lives in the cell with the prisoner. It is difficult at best to keep the other inmates from petting the dogs, speaking to the dogs, and/or feeding scraps to the dogs. It is natural that others are going to be drawn to the dog, but is important to remember that this is a training program, not just pet therapy.

The most serious challenge is one of violence: “The dog handlers clearly feel that they are responsible for the welfare of their dogs.... While a man fighting another man might be left to fend for himself, the inmates agree almost to a man that anyone who harms one of their dogs will face the possibility of retribution” (Britton and Button, 88). Ultimately, though, it is the sadness when the dogs must be returned to the community that is an added challenge to the prisoners, the program, and the dogs themselves. Two things help to ease this sadness. One is the prisoners’ realizing that these dogs that they trained are going to help someone who needs them. The second is that the prison sponsors a graduation program of sorts, where the inmate who trained a particular dog can go through a ceremony and meet the person that the dog went to help—a small consolation, but one that definitely helps in easing the sadness, in knowing that they played such an important role in not only rescuing a dog from a shelter, but also giving it a chance to be able to serve someone who needs help.

This brings it full circle, back to the community. “For these inmates, the program clearly offers the possibility of a link to a community in a positive way, something very few other prison job assignments promise” (Britton and Button, 93). Yes, this program comes with its challenges: higher surveillance, possible mistreatment of the dogs, and the fact that the dogs are temporary and the bond the prisoners have made with them; however, the positives outweigh the challenges. Animal-assisted therapy programs give the prisoners a sense of giving back to the community, a way to heal for some of the harm they’ve done, a connection to another (whether it be dog or human), a sense of responsibility, and a way to ease the feelings of loneliness, sadness and low self-esteem. Who could have predicted that an animal-assisted therapy program could do so much good? Well, whether predicted or not, since the first program was put into place, the positive reaction to the dogs coming from the inmates brings attention that other prisons who have not tried animal-assisted programs yet. One after another, prison after prison is now trying this new program and watching it help the inmates learn life lessons and have meaningful experiences while being locked up.

Notes

1. For more information about Project Pooch and how to adopt any of the dogs, or volunteer, a recommended website is www.Pooch.org.

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