

Secrets Told to Ivy: Animal Assisted Play Therapy in a Children’s Treatment Facility

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A knock on the door interrupts a treatment team meeting. I open the door and standing there is a 3-year-old girl with her child care worker. The child care worker apologizes for interrupting the meeting; he explains that Carrie (fictitious name) insisted on finding me. I kneel down and Carrie in a barely audible voice asks, “Can I pet Ivy?” I said, “Sure you can.” I called Ivy to the door who had been sleeping at my feet during the meeting and wagging her tail she greeted Carrie. Ivy did not lick the little girl in the face or jump around excitedly as you so often see with family pets, but the 9-year-old golden retriever, the sister of Rosie our legendary courthouse dog now retired, just simply stood calmly while Carrie petted her over and over, the whole time her tail was wagging gently. While Carrie petted Ivy she told me about her dog at home named Max, and how much she missed him. It was clear that this little girl sought out Ivy on that day to retrieve a little semblance of home. It is not easy to be 3-years-old and living in emergency foster care after removal from her home by CPS for safety reasons. Prior to Carrie being placed in a foster home, she arrived unannounced multiple times at my office with a child care worker from her cottage in tow, to spend a few minutes with Ivy, and to reconnect with a symbol of the home and family she was sorely missing.

Ivy’s work life at the Children’s Home of Poughkeepsie (CHP) consists of many such poignant moments in her interactions with a range of emotionally troubled children ranging in age from infants to young adults, some of whom are approaching 21.

Animal Assisted Play Therapy

Rise Vanfleet has distinguished herself for many years as a specialist in working with animals in play therapy (Vanfleet, 2008a, 2008b; Vanfleet, & Faa-Thompson, 2010). Rise is

quite knowledgeable about Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) and the complexities and key considerations of training and working with dogs for play therapy purposes. Rise generously makes available helpful information on her website: www.playfulpooch.org. In addition a list of relevant trainings are posted and described on her website. Rise has been helpful to me as a resource on issues related to involving Ivy in play therapy. Mary Thompson (2009) another play therapist has contributed to our knowledge base about involving canines in play therapy. Thompson (Thompson, Mustaine, & Weaver, 2008) as part of her doctoral research did the first controlled study of involving dogs in non-directive play therapy. The results of the study as summarized by Thompson (2009) revealed that the presence of the trained therapy dog in the sessions contributed to an improvement in mood and affect in the children, an increased ability to engage in thematic play, and they more readily established rapport. In addition, they exhibited a decrease in aggressive behavior and play disruptions. Another interesting finding was the children with PTSD who disclosed abuse for the first time, did so in the presence of the dog.

The Concept of a Facility Dog

Often the dogs engaged in the therapy sessions are owned by the therapist. Ivy in contrast is a facility dog, owned by CHP. Ivy is also a service trained dog. Ivy and her famous sister Rosie (Crenshaw, 2011) were trained by Dale and Lu Picard who are the founders of Educated Canines Assisting with Disabilities (ECAD; <http://ecad1.org/default.htm>) in Torrington, CT. The Picard's begin the training process with service dogs shortly after the puppies first open their eyes. The puppies are handled by a wide variety of people to get them used to interacting with a wide range of people from an early age. As they get older they are taken into public facilities of all kinds such as airports, train and bus stations, restaurants, and shopping malls. The dogs receive two years of intensive training (9 to 5 each working day) and

learn at least 80 commands. These dogs are trained to serve a person with disabilities and are required to perform a wide variety of tasks, including opening the refrigerator to bring a drink to a person, to pick up a dropped object to bring it to a person, to put items that are pointed to by a person on the shelves in a grocery cart, to put clothes in and out of the washing machine and dryer, and to turn lights on and off in a room on command. Typically the dogs are matched with a person who has disabilities and the Picard's note that often the dog picks the person with whom they are most compatible during a mixing and matching period at the end of their training. Ivy came to CHP after serving a disabled person admirably for 8 years until her owner died in August of 2011. Ivy went through a significant grieving period during the first few weeks of her assignment to CHP.

Service trained dogs are ideal for assignment to a facility such as CHP because the duties are complex, challenging, and varied. In addition to their extensive training, the dogs that successfully complete the training are endowed with a temperament that is unusually calm and critically important is their ability to remain calm even under conditions of high stress or even chaos. This is why service trained dogs are particularly well-suited as courthouse dogs. Rosie's ability to stay perfectly calm even under the tense conditions of the courtroom played a major role in enabling the child witness to give complete and accurate testimony thereby making history in New York Courts as the first dog ever allowed to comfort a child witness.

As a facility dog, Ivy is available to all the children at CHP when needed. The variety of her duties include greeting children around the campus when on walks with me or another member of the Clinical Staff, attending therapy sessions with children at the request of the therapist and child often enabling children to talk about difficult and sensitive issues as a result of her calm, accepting presence. Children relate to Ivy because of her non-judgmental and non-

evaluative responsiveness to them. Many of the children have experienced prior harm at the hands of adults and struggle to risk trusting them again but the bond with Ivy is wholehearted. It is therapeutic not only that they trust Ivy unequivocally but they are able to give love and affection so freely to another, in this case a special canine.

Clinical Examples of Ivy's Work

Ivy's work is continuously expanding because of the therapeutic value of the unique combination of her extensive service dog training and unusually calm temperament.

Group Play Therapy with Preschoolers in our Group Emergency Foster Care Program (GEFC)

Ivy is a regular participant in a play therapy group I conduct weekly with the help of psychology and social work students with quite young children in our GEFC program. While Ivy is there to comfort any child as needed, I involve Ivy in a directed way as part of an opening ritual. I ask the children, who because of their young age and exposure to trauma tend to be impulsive and constantly in motion, to sit with me in a circle. I then ask them to look at Ivy lying next to me with her head on the floor looking totally calm and relaxed and then I say, "Let's see if we can for just a few minutes be just as calm, quiet, and relaxed as Ivy." The effect is magical. Consistently these children with their eyes glued on Ivy are just as calm and quiet as this special canine. You just need to walk into their cottage to realize how extraordinary this degree of calm and quiet is for this group of young children.

The Secrets and Disclosures made to Ivy in Play Therapy

Ivy is assigned by me or my associate Dr. Jennifer Lee to clinicians who request Ivy's presence in sessions with particular children. I am amazed at her patience, calmness, and the wish of children to tell their secrets and conflicts to her. It is a joy to witness. A 6 year-old, for

example, in a therapy session explained her torn feelings about her imminent discharge to Ivy. Ivy listened attentively, and the child reassured Ivy that she would be back to visit. It was very moving to observe.

A child asked about Ivy's background, and I explained Ivy came to us after her owner died. I told her Ivy had been with the elderly person for 8 years so she is feeling sad. The adolescent girl then proceeded to tell Ivy about the death of her mother and father, that she has been so reluctant to talk about before. They bonded in an instant and it was clear they each understood the other.

On another occasion when a child was unable to talk about her feelings, I went over to Ivy and sat down by her and began to tell Ivy what I thought the child was feeling but was unable to express. The child joined us and explained to Ivy why it was so hard for her to talk about the rejection she felt from her family.

In preparing two young siblings for discharge from the facility, the anticipated separation from the people with whom they had made close attachments was so painful they could not talk about it. I went over to Ivy and sat down next to her and began sharing with Ivy some of the highlights of the play therapy with the girls. I showed Ivy some of the puppets the girls considered as favorites and some of the scenarios and key themes the girls played out with the puppets. The girls were absolutely riveted to the conversation I was having with Ivy. Eventually the youngest of the sisters joined Ivy and me and she took one of her favorite puppets (the Princess) and started interacting with my puppet (the Fireman, who was a trusted friend of the Princess) as we had done many times previously. She then turned to Ivy, and explained why she needed to leave to reunite with her family. She said she would miss Ivy but she also promised to come back to visit her. She then picked up the Snake puppet (a symbol of betrayal in repeated

puppet plays) and said in a very serious tone to Ivy: “Whatever you do Ivy, never trust the snake!”

Courthouse Dog

Ivy has already spent time at the District Attorney’s office and met the Bureau Chief for Special Victims, and many of the Senior Prosecutors and even spent time playing with one of the Judges. She will be spending more time there when the need arises for her to accompany a child on the witness stand. Because of the unparalleled training that service dogs receive, the preparation for court work involves getting Ivy familiar with the courthouse environment. As with Rosie, she would likely sit in on various hearings and judicial proceedings at the discretion of the Judge prior to the trial and spend considerable time with the child witness including time together on the witness stand to get used to the tight space they would need to share. Our hope, if we can raise the necessary funds, is to expand the courthouse dog program to make it available for other children in Dutchess County who are required to testify in court in addition to the children of CHP.

I would like to pay tribute to the groundbreaking work of my play therapy colleague, J. P. Lilly, who more than 15 years ago established Bikers against Child Abuse (BACA) (Vanfleet, Lilly, & Kaduson, 1999) to provide a sense of safety and support to children prior and sometimes during testimony in court. J. P. has assisted me in coordinating with BACA’s NY state representative and I have talked with the local District Attorney’s office as to how the Courthouse Dog Program and BACA may be able to collaborate on some particularly difficult cases where the child witness is unusually terrified or intimidated. The mission of reducing psychological harm to child witnesses in the court system is dear to the heart of both J. P. and mine. The era of silencing our children by threat and terror is coming to an end!

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