

## **Can an animal have an educational value?**

**Of course YES!**

**But that's no so easy...**

Animals are great friends, teachers, confident of children... now we know they can be therapeutic too! But as I said that's not so easy!

Animals affect our lives in many ways.

Domesticated animals changes our way of living. At the end of the last Ice Age we humans lived the transition from hunting-gathering to farming thanks to domestication. We also started to move faster and longer thanks to domestication.

Of course the most significant domestication was the domestication of wolves...

One of the most important aspects of the domestication of canids has to do with the selection of social communicative skills. We know that dogs are more skilful than great apes at a number of tasks in which they must read human communicative signals. Furthermore, wolves raised by humans do not show the same skills as domestic dogs, including puppies that have had little human contact. These findings suggest that during the process of domestication, dogs have been selected for a set of social-cognitive abilities that enable them to communicate with humans in unique ways. Dogs are very smart at using social cues to predict the human behavior.

But domestication doesn't work on one way... we have been domesticated by wolves as much as we domesticated wolves.

Italian zooanthropologist Roberto Marchesini says that we human are warewolves.

Australian anthropologist published a study where they said that when human populations spread in the world we moved partly like non human primate and partly like wolves. But that's normal because we ARE werewolves.

The domestication of the wolf can be considered the first anthropological hybridization of our history. (other domesticated species)

Dogs are socialized on us as much as we are socialized on them.

But we have been hybridized by many other animals. It's habit to say that we are different from animals because we have a CULTURE.

Human is a cultural animal.

But what's culture?

Where does it come from?

For example... dance! Samba was born when europeans arrived in Africa and saw African tribes dancing like crowned cranes dance when they are in love.

Movements and physical features of other species are used as inspiration for cultural peculiarity of our species.

Animal are all over our lives: painted on our t-shirts, as symbols on our cars ...

But what about TRUE animals?

The living animals?

Last century we used animals for a lot of purposes. Dogs were kept to guard our properties, to help in daily life.

When people started to leave country side for towns animals lost their utility.

But we can't live without animals.

So we brought dogs, cats, birds, rabbits to our homes.

We started to consider them less animals and more like children.

So we changed our relationship with them.

We started to watch animals in an anthropomorphic way.

We do not recognize their true needs and what the relationship with them can really bring to our lives.

We buy a border collie just because we like its physical aspect but we know it'll never see a sheep in its all life.

We lost the point.

We lost what a true relationship can add to our lives... this special way that each animal has to see the world!

**A TRUE RELATIONSHIP IS BORN FROM THE REAL ACCEPTANCE OF THE OTHER'S NEEDS.**

So I think that we need to really ask ourselves to rethink our relationship with animals before we talk about what an animals can bring in a kid's life.

Children learned best by seeing and imitating others, so parents now had to be newly self-conscious of their own everyday relations with animals.

Psychological studies reviewing the relationship between animals and children have revealed:

1. The mere presence of animals positively alters children's attitudes about themselves and increases their ability to relate to others.
2. Pets help children develop in various areas including love, attachment, and comfort; sensorimotor and nonverbal learning; responsibility, nurturance, and competence; learning about the life cycle; therapeutic benefits; and nurturing humanness, ecological awareness, and ethical responsibilities
3. Children exhibited a more playful mood, were more focused, and were more aware of their social environments when in the presence of a therapy dog.

Other studies document that children exposed to pets in early life experience enhanced immune function:

1. Fewer allergies and less wheezing and asthma in children exposed to pets during infancy
2. Protection against adult asthma and allergies in adults at age 28 when exposed to pets before 18

Furthermore, it is thought that the reduction in blood pressure achieved through dog ownership can be equal to the reduction achieved by changing to a low salt diet or cutting down on Alcohol. Pet ownership and other animal contact, such as petting animals and watching fish in an aquarium, have specifically been demonstrated to provide cardiovascular benefits.

Examples include:

1. Increased survival time after myocardial infarction for dog owners
2. Decreased risk factors for cardiovascular disease, particularly lower systolic blood pressure, plasma cholesterol and plasma triglycerides
3. Decreased heart rate from petting a dog or watching fish in an aquarium.

In the past 30 years several different studies have focused on the interaction between children and animals.

The company of an animal increases children's socialization and their ability to be with the others.

In Italy a pilot study was carried on at A. Meyers Children Hospital where there are severely ill and hospitalized children. This children are cut off from their everyday lives and for them animals can be so important that the relationship with animals have been described as a "liaison with hope". There are evidence that animals can help children to cope with separation from their families, chronic diseases, pain and also death.

According to some reports, pets, with their morphological and behavioral diversity, could solicit the child in the formation and enrichment of its imaginary world, offering him/her more than one model for his/her elaborative processes and strengthening his/her imagination.

Moreover, the interaction with the animal diversity, or the simple referring to it, could help the child in coping with a multifaceted world, transforming the diffidence in curiosity and tolerance and decreasing widespread fear.

The act of taking care of a companion animal usually decreases generally aggressive behaviors, negligence, little helpfulness.

Pet relationships increase affectivity, fortify the epimeletic tendency of a child, the capabilities to take care, to help and protect someone, and decrease general disorganization, low attention to external and inner world.

Nevertheless a number of children are killed or badly injured by animals attack.

**We must be aware that positive experience don't just magically happen.** They require careful supervision, the monitoring of interaction, the responsibility for the one who is presenting the animal to guarantee animal's welfare (both psychologically and physically), the need to offer both children and animals suitable activities that meet their needs.

It is critically important that children be directly supervised and monitored during all interactions with animals.

The goal of course is to create positive experiences for both animals and children and this is possible only if we suggest particular activities that are in line with the specific need of each children.

A *safety assessment* of both the animal and the child must be made for their appropriateness to be together. A gentle animal can become dangerous when it protects itself from harmful behaviors by children.

**There are some Rules that can make the difference:**

1. Have all animals fully examined by a veterinarian
2. Handle all animals with gentleness and patience from the time they are very young. This will teach animals to feel more comfortable being touched and handled.
3. If possible, train animals to obey commands such as “stop,” “stay,” “sit,” “come” and “leave it.”
4. Make sure that the animals are socialized to different people. Socialized animals will more likely be at ease around others, especially children, and therefore, less likely to react defensively
5. Set aside a designated, secure, protected space for animals to relax without being bothered by children. When an animal feels threatened or bothered, it needs a place to retreat to be alone and safe
6. Always supervise children to assure they interact appropriately with animals
7. learn children rules: some things are allowed and others are not because animals doesn't like them
8. Speak softly around animals. Loud voices or screaming may startle animals, causing them to be defensive
9. Approach an animal by moving slowly and calmly. Sudden movements may cause the animal to defend itself
10. Children should be taught the signs of an angry or frightened animal. In reverse, angry or aggressive children should not handle an animal until the child's anger or aggression has fully dissipated

Nowadays we there a lot of talk about what's called pet therapy.

What do we mean by this word?

By AAI we intend every intervention that involved animals the aims of which is

EDUCATION

THERAPY

RECREATION

REHABILITATION

1792 in England: William Tuke said that taking care of small animals can help mental impaired people

1875: in France a medical doctor suggest that riding could help people with physical problem

The term “pet therapy” was coined in 1964 after a child psychiatrist Boris M. Levinson, observed positive effects while using his dog, Jingles, in sessions with severely withdrawn children. He noticed that the dog served as an ice-breaker and provided a focus for

communication. Thanks to the animal, Levinson was able to establish a relationship with the child and start an effective therapy.

*Animal Assisted Therapies (AAT) are goal-directed interventions in which an animal meeting specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT are delivered and/or directed by a health/human service provider working within the scope of his or her profession. AAT are designed to promote improvement in human physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive functioning. They are provided in a variety of settings and may involve groups or be individual in nature.*

*This process is documented and evaluated.*

*Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) provide opportunities for motivational, educational, and/or recreational benefits in order to enhance quality of life of some human categories such as blind and physical or psychic handicapped persons or children and adults in a social disadvantaged children.*

AAA are delivered in a variety of environments by specially trained professionals, para-professionals in association with animals that meet specific criteria.

What's beneficial in a pet therapy activity is not the presence of the animal.

What makes the difference is the pet partnership.

i.e. the relationship between the animal and its pet operator.

It's extremely important that animals attend a course of Basic Education and Education to Relationship

The PRAGUE DECLARATION, 1998, made by the IAHAIO-INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF HUMAN ANIMAL INTERACTION ORGANIZATION suggest that

“Only domestic animals which have been trained using techniques of positive reinforcement, and which have been, and will continue to be, properly housed and cared for, are involved.”

In 2003 the Parco Natura Viva, due to the ever increasing number of handicapped people attending the facility, organized suitable activities to meet their needs. In 2004 the Natura Amica project was made; it involved small groups of handicapped children in three hour sessions dealing with the controlled and limited relation and interrelation with a few animals of the zoo; they were mostly pets, but some were also more exotic species such as seals, giant tortoises and snakes. It was then that the need to create a suitable work environment to avoid the mingling of zoo visitors-facility users, came up.

Since 2005 a suitable area outside the zoo has been designed; it is near the zoo and in it live some animals accustomed to being touched and petted. This area is an oasis of silence; it is also full of green and the users can move in complete freedom, without risking to get hurt or lost. They can also access any area, so as to have a complete and involving experience with the animal world. In this area, everybody can have a 360 degree experience being an

actor instead of just a watcher. Inside this area, the users are the main characters: the various sectors and the animals interact with the users inviting them to partake of the farm life, so as to make them active subjects.

The animals living in this area are selected depending on the features of each individual and on the race; after a few studies monitoring the animal stress, the operators decided that the animals that would live there would be 3 Tibetan goats, 1 African sheep, 1 Korean pig, 1 female donkey, 1 fish bowl (with koi carps), 4 tortoises, 7 guinea pigs, 4 rabbits!

All animals besides the routine vaccines, underwent continuous veterinary examinations certifying their physical health; moreover, their stress level is closely monitored (the data taken are subject of a degree thesis) so as to be sure that they may never have unpredictable reactions and that they may not be dangerous to any of the users. Since 2005, we have started to work over several matters, proposing both actual animal assisted therapies and psycho educational animal assisted interventions. In 2006, when a heated area was added, we started to also work in winter. The team which plans the sessions is composed of psychiatrists, psychotherapists, psychomotility therapists, teachers, sociomedical operators (referring to a body for treating handicapped people) and ethologists, veterinarians and keepers (working at the Parco natura viva).

The general aims are the following:

1. learning how to take care of someone else
2. stimulating an emotional involvement (emotion control, expression of feelings...)
3. perceiving ourselves as “able to do everything” and so improving the perception of our identity
4. increasing our sense of autonomy and self-esteem
5. developing cognitive abilities (recognizing animals, what they eat, how they need to be taken care of, how they are made, where they live, what their name is, what their features are ...)
6. offering several sensorial experiences (how different are animals to the touch, what are the smells and tactile features distinguishing the various types of food...)
7. using the animal as an intermediary of social relations

We also spend some time inside the Park; sometimes we then organize for the children to work as zoo-keepers aids and assign them the task to enrich the animals environments. This activity is always taken with great joy and satisfaction; this is due to the fact that it is something that give them responsibility and make them feel as “adults”. For them, being recognized by the visitors as part of the Park’s “staff” is very important. Basically, this activity strengthen the main aim of the whole project: give back a healthy image of themselves to children who usually do not feel normal.

The exploration of the Park, allow the children to know the various types of reptiles that lived on our Earth once: in one part of the Park there are statues in the shape of life-size dinosaurs and also a paleontological excavation where children can act as little paleontologists and search for dinosaur bones.

In each session, the final part was dedicated to a small laboratory which allowed the children to handle the finds and at the same time to memorize the concepts they had learned. On this occasion, the children create material that they could later bring home so as to share their experience with other people (parents, brothers, teachers, therapists).

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