

ANIMALS CAN HELP COMFORT VICTIMS OF CHILD ABUSE AT THE CHILD ADVOCACY CENTER
BY ROBERT HUGH FARLEY, M.S.

Editor's Note:

The welfare of the child is always the most important factor of any equation that involves keeping children safe. As caring adults, we may be presented with a situation that urges us to report our concerns to the child protective services within our state when we suspect or know of child abuse, or if a child discloses to us. In a previous article, we discussed how challenging it is for children to speak about the abuse that happened to them, and the good that Child Advocacy Centers can do within investigations that have traditionally been uncomfortable and upsetting for the child. With so much confusion about the reality of child abuse investigations, we at VIRTUS felt that it would be helpful to understand the process once an allegation is reported. This article expands upon the topic and introduces comfort animals that are sometimes used in the forensic interview process to decrease the child's anxiety and help them begin to feel safe.

Introduction

Every young person who has been the victim of child abuse, whether sexual, physical, emotional or neglect, will have his/her own, individual reaction to the trauma that was suffered. Many children will have long-lasting effects, while others are able to cope better, often as a result of effective therapy. In the United States, when law enforcement or child protective services suspect that a child has been abused, the child is brought to a Child Advocacy Center (CAC), where the child is asked to "tell your story," to a forensically trained interviewer. "Telling your story" (especially these types of stories) to a complete stranger is difficult. In a number of these interviews, some children will actually manifest some of their psychological consequences of child abuse such as fear, anxiety, depression, anger and hostility. For that reason and so the child will not be re-traumatized during the forensic interview, a growing number of CACs are incorporating animals to play a helpful role.

Background

For years, child abuse professionals have been aware how difficult it can be for a child to not only disclose abuse, but in some cases, to also identify a loved one as the offender. To minimize additional trauma during the interview process, some professionals have used a variety of interview aids to assist children in disclosing, such as dolls, anatomical dolls, stuffed animals, model houses, sandboxes, crayons, paper, human figure drawings, body diagrams and freehand drawings. Although these tools or props have worked with a variety of success, interviewers were still looking for something that could be utilized to put a child at ease prior to the forensic interview, during the interview and following the interview. Approximately ten years ago, some CAC's began using animals to comfort victims of child abuse, including dogs, cats, rabbits or even birds, such as parrots. This concept has become so popular that it has expanded to using animals to comfort children who are preparing to testify or who are actually testifying in a courtroom setting.

How do Comfort Animals Work?

The term "comfort animal" is used because it is a neutral title. Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines the word "comfort" as 1: to give strength, and 2: to ease grief or trouble, both of which convey healthy images for the animal and victim. Utilizing comfort animals at the CAC often reduces anxiety and stress for the victim. Animals can also aid in building a rapport with the professional adult interviewer while promoting engagement with a child who may be nervous or withdrawn. Additionally, a child is much more likely to relax at the CAC if the child enjoys interacting with animals. A sign and photo in the lobby of the child-friendly CAC often announces the presence of a comfort animal who is working there. Comfort animals can assist in making children feel more comfortable at the CAC in a variety of ways: As greeters During the forensic interview During a sexual specific medical examination During therapy As part of court preparation During court testimony When parents initially arrive at a CAC, many are often concerned about having their child undergo a forensic interview, believing incorrectly that the interview is comparable to a police interrogation.

Apprehensive parents are often pleasantly surprised when informed that the CAC has a comfort animal as part of the team.

After the initial introduction to the comfort animal, and if the parent and child are both agreeable, the animal can join the child during the forensic interview. No one is ever forced to interact with a comfort animal and the animal is never left alone with the child. In cases where there are no allergies or fearful reactions, some CACs have found that the animal is more effective if there is some contact between the child and the animal, such as petting. In many cases, the child will tell the horrific details of their abuse to the animal instead of directly speaking to the forensic interviewer. Additionally, some children may regain a sense of control by simply choosing where the animal will be positioned or located during the interview. In some cases, the animal can be utilized by the interviewer to refocus the child's attention should he/she start acting out or become distracted.

If a sexual-specific medical exam is needed, the comfort animal can be utilized to distract and/or relax the child, since from their perspective, a complete stranger is conducting an intrusive examination. The comfort animal may also be used with the child as part of follow-up individual or group therapy at the CAC.

Should the prosecutor decide to prosecute the offender, the CAC's comfort animal may be utilized while preparing the child to testify in court. Often a bond was created between the animal and the child during the forensic interview and the child feels safe and secure when around the animal. The child is usually happy to revisit with the animal, which makes the courtroom preparation easier for everyone involved. Courtrooms can be an extremely intimidating and vulnerable environment for the child. The CAC's comfort animal may be used to relax the child when the child is actually testifying in a court, although in some areas of the United States the courthouse may have their own comfort animal. When allowed, the comfort animal, such as a dog, may be seated in the courtroom or lying on the floor of the witness box as the child is testifying, providing the child with a sense of safety and comfort.

Every jurisdiction in the United States has its own laws, rules and guidelines for using comfort animals in child abuse cases. Some CAC animals can only be used as greeters at the CAC, but are not allowed in the forensic interview. If comfort animals are allowed to be in the forensic interview, there may be a time limit set for the interview. Some courthouses don't allow comfort animals, while in others, animals are allowed during testimony in the courtroom but only if the animal is a registered therapy animal with a handler.

Conclusion

Recently, I was conducting a child abuse investigation training seminar at a CAC in Pensacola, Florida, called Gulf Coast Kid's House. As I walked through the CAC, I was greeted by "Trooper," who is a seven-year-old Shetland sheepdog and is part of the CAC team. According to the CAC's executive director, Stacey Kostevicki, Trooper was previously trained as a therapy dog and had been donated to the CAC by a Board Member. As I was introduced to Trooper, the dog sat and then put up his paw to give me a high-five. That gesture would likely bring a smile to the face of any fearful child visiting the CAC, as it did me.