



Trevor Walsh, 9, feeding crackers to Jack the sheep with support person Sharon Cichocki at his side at Spring Brook Farm in West Chester. MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer

Animal magnetism

Parents know that critters large and small have been helping autism-spectrum kids come out of their shell — and research is beginning to agree.

By Rita Giordano
STAFF WRITER

Sabrina Opstbaum wasn't expecting miracles when she started taking her daughter Reegan to the Barn at Spring Brook Farm, an animal-assisted intervention program for special needs children in West Chester. Like many kids on the autism spectrum, Reegan didn't seem to connect with people, but she always enjoyed the company of animals.

After two years of weekly visits and summer camp with Anna-belle the goat, Sugar the sheep, Dreamer the miniature horse, and their other barnyard cohorts, Reegan, now 8, is in many ways a changed little girl.

"She's become less aggressive," Opstbaum said. "She's in a calm mood when she's there, and it even carries over into school the next day, sometimes two days after. She's just more calm. And happy."

What made the difference? "I honestly think it's the fact that the animals don't expect anything from her," Opstbaum said. "Their calm transfers over to her. With people, we're always placing demands. With an-

imals, they're not asking for anything. It's just, 'Be with me.'"

A growing body of research has uncovered evidence that animal-assisted interventions (AAI) may help improve the lives of people with autism by addressing some of the disorder's more difficult symptoms.

Among the studies' key findings are increased social interaction and decreased anxiety — See **ANIMALS** on G4



Farm volunteer Morgan Newton is Reegan Opstbaum's support staff for her weekly visit. The animal-assisted interventions are considered by parents to be a success.



There is belief that dieting could be a better-thought process. jakubzak / iStockphoto

Putting your mind where your mouth is

By Ilene Raymond Rush
FOR THE INQUIRER

In this season of New Year's resolutions, Amy Tuttle wants you to reconsider traditional dieting.

"Dieting is inherently difficult," said Tuttle, a nutrition therapist in Chestnut Hill who helps clients assess their relationship with their bodies, food, and dieting.

"It's externally guided rather than internally. It doesn't let you listen to your body or your food preferences, but sets up rules and asks you to be obedient. That's a setup — and it's hu-

man nature to rebel."

A meta-analysis by the Journal of the American Medical Association supports this vision, showing that while patients managed to lose weight on diets, victory can be short-lived. Over six months, the most successful diet, the Atkins diet, resulted in the highest weight loss (22.3 pounds), but after one year, participants had regained eight of the pounds that they had lost.

"Whether it's your first or 15th year of dieting, there you are, further away from being able to trust your body or See **DIETING** on G4

FIVE QUESTIONS

It's the snow blower time of year, and that is bad

Surgeon: Many don't realize the blades of a jammed machine that is "off" can still move.

By Sandy Bauers
FOR THE INQUIRER

Nicholas Phillips has almost come to dread winter.

Every time there's a significant snowfall, he'll likely be seeing a patient who has lost parts of his fingers trying to clear a clogged snow blower.

Phillips is an orthopedic hand surgeon with Holy Redeemer Health System. The injuries are disturbing not just because they can be gruesome, but because

they are preventable.

It's not necessarily that people are stupid or careless. The injuries are the result of a moment's inattention, perhaps. More commonly, people do not realize that even if the machine has been turned off, the blades often will still move when they are cleared of an icy clog. In a single moment, a person's life is changed.

According to national statistics from the Consumer Product Safety Commis-

sion, several hundred people a year lose parts of their fingers in snow blower accidents. Looking at the accidents in 2016, although a few men suffered heart attacks while using snow blowers, and one backed into the blade and cut his leg, most involved lacerations and amputations of fingers.

The American Society for Surgery of the Hand has profiled the typical patient: a 44-year-old man with amputations of the tips of his fingers — most often the middle finger — on the dominant hand. See **FIVE QUESTIONS** on G3

IN THE GAME | G2

Now I lay me down to stretch, and fall asleep.

MEDICAL MYSTERY | G2

The ailing husky that just would not heal.

