

Animals helping soothe the autistic

ANIMALS from G1
classic autism earmarks that increase spectrum kids' isolation, often make them targets of bullies, and limit communication even with those who love them most.

Page Walker Buck, an associate professor of social work at West Chester University, has been studying families whose children brook to the Barn at Spring Brook Farm for about a year. Some parents, she knows, turn to AAI in frustration, even desperation.

If an animal program appears to result in positive change, the parents get what Buck calls "extended benefits." Namely, hope. "Hope helps family functioning," Buck said, "because hope mitigates stress."

Dismissed as anecdotal

For decades, there have been case studies and research attesting to the remarkable outcomes of animal therapy programs. But much of it was dismissed as merely anecdotal or lacking basis in serious scientific study methods.

Some parents of children with autism and other disabilities have spent substantial sums to have their children swim with dolphins, lured by the suggestion of wondrous results.

Newer studies have cast doubt on the lasting value of these therapies.

"The quality of the research has improved enormously, and the funding agencies are starting to take the field more seriously as a result," said James A. Serpell, a professor of animal welfare with the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine.

Recently, the National Institutes of Health, the nation's largest public funder of health research, and the Waltham Centre for Pet Nutrition, a division of Mars Inc., agreed to a five-year extension of the research partnership they started 10 years ago into the study of human-animal interaction, a growing field known as anthrozoology.

That partnership has yielded a wide range of research, including studies that suggest animal interactions may have beneficial impacts on children on the autism spectrum and people with other disabilities.

"It's too early to make any broad pronouncements, but it's certainly promising, and we're getting beyond the threshold of 'do no harm' to maybe if there are benefits, being able to quantify them," said James A. Griffin, NIH childhood development and behavior deputy branch chief.

Temple Grandin, a renowned animal behavior expert who is herself on the autism spectrum, thinks it makes sense that animals and people with autism may have an affinity. The professor of animal science at Colorado State University said animals, like some people on the spectrum, tend to be visual thinkers.

"Animals don't think in words," she said.

The most commonly studied



Trevor Walsh (left) was comfortable petting goats. At right, Nicholas Opstbaum. MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer



Guinea pigs have played a big role in Australian studies.

interventions involve horses or dogs, but some of the most intriguing AAI research involves a far more unassuming creature: the humble guinea pig.

In one study, Australian schoolchildren on the spectrum exhibited more social behaviors — talking to people, looking at their faces, even touching them — when they got to interact with guinea pigs rather than just toys. They also laughed and smiled more — behaviors seen as precursors to social interaction.

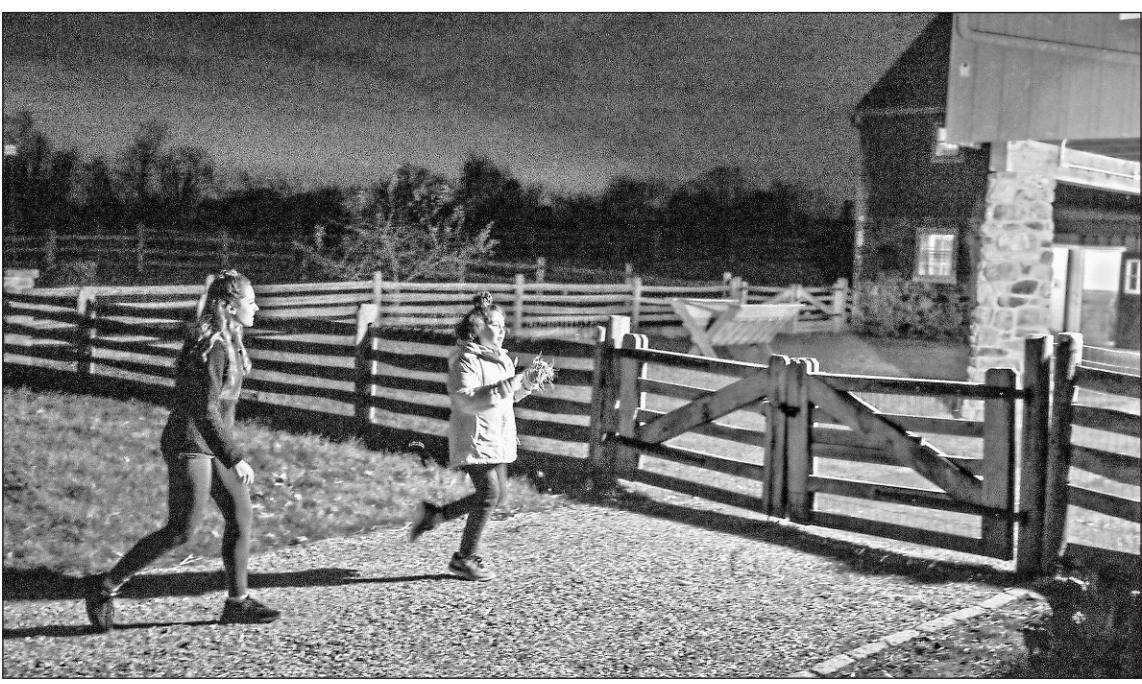
Another Australian study



Reegan Opstbaum gets help from Morgan Newton.

showed a positive physiological response to the animals that could extend to easier connections with humans. For the study, autistic children and neurotypical kids wore wristbands that monitored their neurological arousal levels while performing certain routine classroom activities together, including handling guinea pigs.

Both sets of children said they were happy playing with the guinea pigs, but, unlike the neurotypical kids, the autistic children's anxiety levels dropped. In other words, the animals seemed to make them calmer. The researchers suggested that the animals may serve as "social buffers" for autistic children, possibly facili-



Reegan Opstbaum runs around the barn with Newton while visiting Spring Brook Farm. MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff

tating interaction with other children just by being there.

"Some of the children described the guinea pigs as their friends, even best friends," said Marguerite E. O'Haire, lead researcher for both studies. "Many children would sit near the cage when stressed or just hang out there to watch them."

O'Haire, an assistant professor of human/animal interaction at Purdue University's College of Veterinary Medicine, said the results of studies such as hers show promise for some people on the autism spectrum. However, she said, much more study is needed.

"One of the key areas for future research on this topic," O'Haire said, "is to understand for whom it will work and for whom it might not so we can better direct resources and tailor programming."

An unexpected friendship

A small posse of baby goats spills out of a barn door, scampering and frolicking in a fenced paddock under an early evening sky. Two little boys are in hot pursuit, laughing, giggling.

"Help me, Trevor! I can't get him!" calls out Nicholas Opstbaum, 9, trying to head off one of the animals. Trevor Walsh, also 9, grins broadly as he runs to catch up.

Trevor is on the autism spectrum. Nicholas is not. But Nicholas is the kind of person Trevor had never before known. He is Trevor's friend.

"Trevor never had that in a peer, not even in school," said his mother, Laurie Beatty-Walsh. "Before the Barn, he wasn't able to respond to the offer of friendship."

Trevor's parents first brought him to the Barn because he was terrified of dogs. They thought the program might help. At first he wanted no part of the animals, but with the staff's help, that gradually changed.

Then Trevor and Nicholas started to get acquainted, too. Nicholas attends the program with Reegan, his younger sister who is on the spectrum.

Activities with the animals have become the boys' social bridge. Now they also play together every week at the Walshes' home.

Labeled nonverbal because he would only repeat what other people said or what he heard on television, Trevor now uses his own words with Nicholas. They make each other laugh; they get each other's senses of humor. And Trevor has begun to show interest in other people, too.

"It's created so much improvement in his life and my family's life," Beatty-Walsh said.

It has something to do with the animals, she said. "They are calming, and they're a motivator."

In the spring, Trevor is going to help raise a calf through 4-H, the nonprofit youth organization. Nicholas wants to do it, too, Beatty-Walsh said.

After all, they're friends.

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Using mindfulness to aid in weight-loss fight

DIETING from G1

yourself," said Tuttle.

According to Marketdata Enterprises Inc., an independent market research publisher, the number of active dieters fell 10 percent since 2015 to 97 million

in 2017, due to a "growing sense of acceptance movement and dieter fatigue." The latest Centers for Disease Control and Prevention statistics show that the nation is getting fatter, not thinner, yet the dieting industry continues to grow, reaching \$66.3 billion in 2016.

If you're above your natural healthy weight, first you have to figure out why, Tuttle says. Reasons could include mindless eating, mindless *not* eating (when you get too busy to eat and come home starving), mindful not eating (dieting), or emotional eating.

To help clients understand where they are, Tuttle employs mindfulness training, asking questions to help them understand their eating patterns, and develop an honest assessment of what their healthy weight might be.

Participants are then counseled to find their way back to this natural weight — which may not match the recommended weight charts — by eating like a baby.

"Babies eat until they're com-

fortably full, then they turn away from the spoon," she says. "They eat foods that their bodies like and that they like."

Which doesn't mean nourishment goes out the window.

"If we feed babies and kids a variety of foods — good, bad, healthy or unhealthy — they choose foods that give them a healthy intake. Only when we get older do we move to 'all or nothing' thinking," she says. "As a mindfulness teacher I support people to find a middle way, asking them to ask themselves, what do I like and need, and how much will be enough?"

Tuttle advises that people feed their bodies several times a day with foods that combine carbohydrates, protein and fat. That includes classic dieting no-no's like pizza and trail mix. The trick is to eat when you're hungry and stop when you're full, which can be difficult and scary for those used to deprivation eating.

"I don't want people to eat wimpy food, low-calorie or low-fat foods," she says. "Real foods have enough carbs or fat so you won't get so hungry sooner."

Emily Rubin, the main dietitian at Jefferson's Celiac Center, Fatty Liver Center, and Weight Management Center, finds that such lifestyle modifications are



"Dieting is inherently difficult," says nutrition therapist Amy Tuttle, who says you should be able to listen to your body's needs. Amy Tuttle

the best approach to weight loss. "Mindful eating is definitely healthier and can lead to better long-term results," said Rubin. "By eating when you're hungry you aren't always thinking of your next meal."

But Kelly Allison, director of the Penn Center for Weight and Eating Disorders, cautions that there's no weight-loss magic in mindfulness.

"It's appealing to think a mindfulness approach could help us with long-term weight management, but it depends on what your goal is — if you want to maintain weight, it helps you slow things down and be more in touch when you're full. But there are no good long-term studies that show that mindfulness can help you lose weight and keep it off long term better

than caloric restriction can."

For Janice Platt, 62, formerly of Cherry Hill, the mindfulness approach to weight loss was difficult, but welcomed. As a binge eater who had once gained 90 pounds, she realized that she was using food to blunt her emotions.

"I learned a long time ago that diets weren't going to do it for me," she said. Having been on diets since she was a teenager, she knew that no matter what the plan, "it worked for awhile and then it didn't."

Working with Tuttle and a support group, Platt said, she learned how to eat, how to enjoy foods, and how to pay attention to what she is chewing and tasting.

"I'm still in the process of learning," said Platt. "Food is

GETTING MINDFUL: AN EXERCISE

Amy Tuttle guides her patients to think about their internal sense of their weight and emotional issues by asking themselves questions such as these:

What's here now? Access any thoughts, feelings or sensations you're experiencing. Acknowledge any emotions of shame or guilt or fear. Are you hungry? What does that feel like to you?

What's true about what's here now? This might not only be in relationship to food but also to personal relationships or health issues.

What's needed now? Do you need to go on a diet? Do you need to cry?

How much is enough? If you're starting a binge, do you want to eat four bags of M&M's or two? If you're in a group, how much support do you want or need?

still an issue; there are lots of emotions involved, particularly with comfort foods. But if I want to eat cookies or cake, I don't have the self-hatred. I feel like I can eat like a normal person now."