Bonding between animals and humans has been noted for a long time.

Stories abound in literature of the ways that people and their pets have fostered and created valuable relationships. More recently, research has shown a strong impact from the pet relationship in health-related settings. Positive changes have been seen in people developing resilience, self-reliance, and in making progress in treatment. Children who have difficulty relating to other children and adults have been observed to behave differently with pets. They demonstrate greater self-confidence, more consistent awareness of the pet's needs and the ability to take initiative to satisfy the pet—they've made contact! Sometimes this improves their ability to transfer these behaviors to people.

An innovative pet therapy program was initiated two years ago at the ECLC of New Jersey school in Ho-Ho-Kus. Planned to integrate pet contacts into daily school life, the three-pronged program includes pet-partner dogs' classroom visits, a facility/service dog, which has become an essential part of the physical therapy activities, and therapeutic horseback riding.

In collaboration with a dog trainer experienced in working with children with disabilities, the dogs and their owners visit each class weekly in a structured yet relaxed setting. The students learn to read the dog's body posture, to teach the dog to respond to commands and to do tricks, and to guide them through an agility course. For some students, this has been a natural transition, for others, the animals have posed significant hurdles. Apprehension, timidity, and impulsivity are challenging behaviors that interfere with the pleasure of interaction. With encouragement and familiarity, many students have been calmed and some of the behaviors have been markedly modified.

Teaching the dog to follow commands may be the first time that the student has experienced being 'a teacher;' the student is in control of directing and evaluating the task. The child learns about consistency as well as the trials, tribulations and determination required to accomplish a common goal. "...they learn to speak a new language—dog—as well as read and respect it..."

The facility/service dog at ECLC, Patrina, is trained to do specific tasks that are helpful to a child with disabilities. Her training is in collaboration with a dog trainer experienced in working with children with disabilities. The students learn to read the dog's body posture, to teach the dog to respond to commands and to do tricks, and to guide them through an agility course. For some students, this has been a natural transition, for others, the animals have posed significant hurdles. Apprehension, timidity, and impulsivity are challenging behaviors that interfere with the pleasure of interaction. With encouragement and familiarity, many students have been calmed and some of the behaviors have been markedly modified.

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The facility/service dog at ECLC, Patrina, is trained to do specific tasks that are helpful to a child with disabilities. Her training allows her to be an integral part of a student's prescribed therapy plans, such as working on postural control and developing...
strength and balance. She is a familiar and very loved presence. Using facility/service dogs as part of physical therapy sessions serves many purposes.

Often, when disabilities are a factor, the challenges of moving one’s body are very difficult for students. Having a facility/service dog involved increases the level of interest and raises levels of arousal making movement less of a chore. The facility/service dog engages the student unconditionally and without words, creating within the therapy sessions a partnership that strengthens the student’s determination to persevere in spite of physical limitation or resistance.

For example, one of ECLC’s students, Shellssea, worked on her hand-grip strength as well as her range of motion in her shoulders by holding onto a tug toy as the facility/service dog, Patrina, pulled her on a scooter. This activity worked on her postural control of her trunk (meaning her core stability and strength) as well as on her righting responses and balance. As Patrina moved Shellssea in different directions, she needed to make adjustments to her body in order to successfully stay on the scooter without falling. These skills are so important for the students. Having strength and balance to be able to negotiate the school environment as well as the outside world helps them.

Two classes participate in the therapeutic riding program at a riding stable with a staff experienced in working with children with disabilities. Children have moved incrementally from standing next to horses to mounting them, to slowly indicating that they are ready to have the horse move along. Sitting astride the horse, the child takes on a demeanor of self-assurance and control. The children are invited to groom and feed the animals. Children who may be sensory sensitive may be the first to stroke a horse or brush its coat. Other children with balance issues may accomplish sitting on a saddle, holding the reins carefully and confidently. New skills and new behaviors don’t always come easily, but in certain settings amazing things have been observed to happen.

There is a level of enthusiasm and commitment to the pet therapy programs that is reinforced by many observations. Across the board, students, teachers and families cheer these many experiences. The school is grateful to the supporters of this multi-experience pet therapy program. The Jordan Fiddle Foundation has funded the pet-partner dog classroom visits, one of their teachers trained with Canine Companions for Independence and is the facilitator for Patrina, and the ECLC school budget supports the therapeutic horseback riding.

ECLC looks forward to developing and broadening the scope of this significant contribution to their students’ daily life in school.

The Story Behind Patrina

Patrina came to ECLC from Canine Companions for Independence (CCI). They are a non-profit organization that breeds, raises, trains and places service dogs with people with disabilities or facilities that work in education or healthcare settings. Not only do they place the dog, but they provide continued support to ensure quality partnerships.

Once someone applies and is accepted by CCI, they must attend a two week training in which they are trained on how to handle the dog and the various commands of a CCI service dog. Patrina is trained in over 40 commands that are incorporated into whatever function she is providing to a student. She can retrieve dropped items, pull a student on a scooter, turn on and off a light switch as well as provide sensory support to students.

Patrina joined ECLC one year ago and assists the students in a variety of ways. She not only provides emotional, motivational and academic support but she also works with students in Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy. When dealing with students who are dysregulated, Patrina’s presence helps the student take the emphasis off of the dysregulating issue. She then assists the student with emotional support to become regulated and proceed with the school day.