

Dogs as healers : CALM's new pet therapy pilot program focuses on abused children

By MARILYN MCMAHON, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

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Maddie, a mellow golden retriever, and Gigi, a sturdy English bulldog, don't know it, but they are pioneers in an experimental program at Child Abuse Listening and Mediation, better known as CALM.

Its impressive title is "A Qualitative Exploration Into the Effects of the Human and Animal Connection," which is the topic of a doctoral dissertation by Brenda Murrow.

Simply put, Maddie and Gigi are the first participants in the Pet Therapy Pilot Program at CALM, a nonprofit agency in Santa Barbara County that focuses on preventing, assessing and treating child abuse and family violence.

In a serendipitous turn of events, the CALM staff was hoping to start such a program just about the time Ms. Murrow, 37, moved to Santa Barbara from Boulder, Colo., to finish working on her Ph.D. at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Summerland.

Maddie, a golden retriever, and Gigi, an English bulldog, are pioneers in an experimental program at Child Abuse Listening and Mediation, or CALM. Their owners are Cecilia Schneider, left, and Brenda Murrow, coordinator of the Pet Therapy Pilot Program.
THOMAS KELSEY/NEWS-PRESS

"I was doing my clinical training at CALM and was trying to decide on a topic for my dissertation when the pet therapy idea was discussed," she said during an interview at her home in Summerland, which she shares with 10-year-old Maddie.

Cecilia Schneider, a CALM intern therapist, is the owner of 4-year-old Gigi.

Ms. Murrow said the first time she saw pet therapy in action was at Grassy Key, Fla., during a high school trip in 1991 to the Dolphin Lab, which had a Dolphin Assisted Therapy program.

"I saw dolphins interacting with a child who had Down syndrome," said Ms. Murrow, who also did some research on the therapeutic connection between humans and animals while working with the rape crisis center in Boulder.

"The center had a program for adult women who had been abused as children. They

worked with horses, which made them feel loved in a safe way," Ms. Murrow said. "I saw why there was a connection. A large part of our brain we share with mammals."

In January, Ms. Murrow began collaborating with Dr. Jessica Adams, Ph.D., CALM director of psychological programs, and Elizabeth Rumelt, CALM clinical director, to plan the program, which is scheduled to begin this month for children ages 5 through 14.

Maddie and Gigi will participate in four weekly sessions at CALM headquarters, 1236 Chapala St.

"They will be on hand the first 15 minutes of the regular sessions with a child to supplement therapy they are getting from staff members," said Ms. Murrow. "During the first meeting, (the kids) will get acquainted with the dog, learning how she likes to be treated and talking about the dog's boundaries. Once they know what Maddie's or Gigi's boundaries are, they will be asked what boundaries they should have."

She explained that discussion of boundaries will include appropriate and inappropriate touching and the difference between personal space and public space.

"We will impress upon them that they have a choice on how close to allow other people to come to them," said Ms. Murrow.

Communication and how to identify feelings will be discussed at the second session. "How does the dog communicate that she wants to go outside or needs a hug? How do you communicate your feelings?" are among the questions asked.

During the third session, the child will tell the dog a story while grooming her.

"This is done for two reasons," explained Ms. Murrow. "Grooming is a tactile activity, and the story is a verbal activity. This encourages them to use their left and right brain facilities."

Saying goodbye is the focus of the final session because "a lot of the children involved in domestic violence have had many separations. The ability to process loss of a loved one is an important skill," she said.

Photos will be taken of the child with the dog, and a booklet of the pictures will be given to the child to remember.

"We call this a transitional object to assist them with the end of their therapy with the dog," said Ms. Murrow, who will complete her Ph.D. in clinical psychology late next year.

After that, Ms. Murrow plans to do some research, writing, teaching and work with individual clients.

It will be a definite change from her former career working for technology firms in Colorado, where she graduated from Gateway High School in Aurora in 1992.

She earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics in 1996 from the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley and her master's degree in business administration from the University of Colorado in Denver in 1998.

Stints at Lucent Technologies in Broomfield, Colo., and Sun Microsystems in Boulder followed.

While still working full time at Sun Microsystems, she began studying for her doctorate at Pacifica.

"In 2011, the company was bought by Oracle, and I thought it was a good time to make my move to Santa Barbara," said Ms. Murrow, who is looking forward to monitoring the CALM pet therapy program.

"I believe it will work. When a child has been abused, it is hard to resume human relationships. Dogs, who are kind, gentle and pleasant, can help them make that bridge," she said.