



Once Upon a Time at Fairyland

By C.J. Hirschfield

The animal effect

One of the best parts of working at Fairyland is the freedom to create new programs, try them out and then evaluate their success. Here's a story about one of those programs.

For years we believed our gentle animals had a therapeutic effect on the inner city and special-needs kids we serve on a regular basis. We can tell you plenty of anecdotes.

There was the boy undergoing cancer therapy who bonded with our alpaca. We had a foster kid who interned in our animal department and said Fairyland was the only place where he could be himself. Then there are the many kids whose only experience with animals has been with scary looking pit bulls. They were even afraid of our rabbits – until they held them. Then they didn't want to let them go.

We were convinced that only good things would come from a program that brought together animals and at-risk kids, so we applied for a grant from the San Francisco-based Stuart Foundation, whose motto is "Investing in Children and Youth to Create Lifelong Impact." We proposed to educate the kids about animal care and provide a structured opportunity to "experience and build empathy and overall self-esteem."

The seven-month program ended recently, and we've just finished our report to the foundation, which included "disappointments," "aspects of the project left incomplete" and "unanticipated benefits or successes."

We didn't mind. Because we love the program so much, we were excited to discuss how we can make it better.

Before I tell you what we'll change, let me share what we accomplished.

We ended up working with 19 at-risk children for three one-on-one visits. Identifying the kids who would benefit from the program introduced us to a number of local service organizations,



Photo by Maria Rodriguez

When you bring together special kids and special animals, magic happens at Children's Fairyland.

including Richmond's Building Blocks for Kids (a wrap-around program providing psychological and educational support to low-income families), the Ann Martin Center (providing psychological and diagnostic services to families in Alameda County), Alternative Family Services (foster and adoption services) and Adopt a Special Kid. Our animal caretaker conducted all the visits, tailoring activities to each child's specific needs, modeling reciprocal animal respect and caring, and providing emotional support. In short, we taught the kids how to care for other living beings.

Here's the good news. Case-workers who referred their clients to our program said our sessions were "extremely beneficial to the client's overall mental health ... decreasing symptoms associated with mental health diagnosis." They "contributed to client's developing a nurturing attitude toward animals."

Other comments: "Confidence appears to have developed significantly over the past three visits." "The ways in which he interacts with adults and peers has become increasingly more positive." "Able to practice assertive communication skills." "More likely to interact with peers." "Inspired to seek out animal interactions again in the future."

And the not-so-positive re-

sults?

We learned that transportation for these kids is a problem because many of them lead extremely chaotic lives. That meant too many missed appointments. Some kids had to cancel because they couldn't get to the park, even on public transportation. We'll look at ways to work with our partner agencies to provide rides to and from Fairyland.

We also learned that while all of the children benefited from their participation in the program, the older children seemed to engage more deeply with the animals. So we'll raise the minimum age from five to six.

We learned that coordinating with individual caregivers referred by partner organizations may require more expertise or experience than our coordinator can offer. We need more support and education.

The funded program is over, but our enthusiasm continues. Our animal caretaker developed genuine mentor relationships with some of the children and has continued to host them in ongoing informal sessions. We recently held a special event for these kids in which we brought in animals from Lyon Ranch Animal Rescue, an organization that trains rescue animals for therapy activities. We learned that the kids relate to rescue animals and the tough lives from which they've often escaped.

The animals don't judge the kids, and the kids know it. Seeing these kids boldly approach a camel for a kiss and bravely allowing a macaw to perch on their arm is priceless. One young man who would not speak or go near any animal when he first came to us was enthusiastically playing with the other kids after he had spent time up-close with a variety of animals – from a baby alligator to our two new park lambs. In every case he waited patiently for his turn to touch.

Now that we know the power of the program and what we need to do to improve outcomes, it's time to find another funder. We wish them luck in trying to refuse us!

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