

# Sheila the Australian conqueror Canine therapy: a case study of overcoming fear of dogs

Maya Schwartz Laufer, PhD.

**Abstract:** *Fear of animals is natural for some people, especially children and adults who did not grow up with animals. Dogs are the most common house pet however, the fear of them is complexed and tangible. This paper examines the process one child made; from being terrified of dogs to loving them with no restrictions. Animal assistive therapy usually uses small animals- such as bunnies, guinea pigs, parrots, hamsters, but canine therapy, uses dogs only! Humans and dogs have had a special bond for thousands of years—we see it in the way dogs work, play, and live with us (American Kennel club) Dogs have certain genes that, in humans, are associated with the rare genetic disorder: Williams-Beuren syndrome - a symptom of which is “indiscriminate friendliness.” (Bridgett M. vonHoldt et al 2017) However, not all dogs “love” everyone, some dogs are afraid of certain people, noises, human reactions, movement and other animals. Canine therapy is more common for children with autism, but there are so many other uses for “normal” children that canine therapy can assist with; such as: low self - esteem, self - control, sensory regulation, mutual listening, deferred gratification, human interaction, social and leadership skills, and fear of dogs.*

*The purpose of this paper is to explore the impacts canine-assisted therapy and canine activities have on children in elementary school in general and, on one child with a fierce fear of dogs in particular - physically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally. It will also identify and investigate the evidence to further determine if and how therapy dogs have positive impacts on children in an educational setting in only 8 sessions.*

**Key words:** *Animal Assistive Therapy, dog therapy, canine therapy, school activity,*

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## I. Introduction

Archeological evidence suggests that dogs have shared a common evolutionary niche with humans for over 140,000 years. Neither could hunt better alone than together, and mitochondrial DNA studies show that protodogs<sup>1</sup> evolved at the same time that Homo sapiens appeared (Morey 1992, 1994). The identification of the earliest dogs is challenging because of the absence and/or mosaic pattern of morphological diagnostic features in the initial phases of the domestication process (Boschin F,2020). This suggests that humans and dogs have a long history of shared semiotic activity where dogs were attending to human social behavior in an opportunistically collaborative, reciprocal way (Solomon 2023). This process turned dogs into students of human movement (Gladwell 2006) who are highly skilled at “ontological choreography” (Haraway 2003:50) and problem solving in coordination with humans (Hare et al. 2002) During the past two decades there has been a dramatic shift in what dogs signify in human life worlds (Katz 2003). Animal partners give children a sense of “aliveness,” or - “vitality affects” that are present in animal’s actions. In child animal interaction, (Stern 1985) the animal’s subjective presence is continuously available, confirming the child’s own sense of agency. Interactions with animals provide a sense of connection across essential difference, which may be realized in pretend play when children enact animal properties and actions. In interactions with animals, children have opportunities to learn that agency has a shared meaning across species, constituting a common social world (Myers 1997:82–85). “Seeing Heart dogs” to help children with autism to achieve their “emotional-insightful health” (Levinson 1969:111–112). “When the child plays with the dog, he establishes his own world, the boundaries of which he himself prescribes. The therapist, therefore, participates in a common adventure by entering into a corner of the child’s world where the child feels secure. Levinson (1969:67–68) Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior, special affinity and connection that

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<sup>1</sup> The **Paleolithic dog** was a Late Pleistocene canine. They were directly associated with human hunting camps in Europe over 30,000 years ago and it is proposed that these were domesticated. They are further proposed to be either a proto-dog and the ancestor of the domestic dog or an extinct, morphologically and genetically divergent wolf population.

some individuals with autism feel with animals (Grandin and Johnson 2005) Sigmund Freud used his dog to facilitate communication with his patients; and found that many patients felt more comfortable talking through and accompanying the dog and so this interaction served as a springboard, until they felt comfortable talking directly with Freud. In the early 1960's, Boris Levinson, a child psychotherapist, noticed that one of his patients (who had verbal communication difficulties) began to communicate with him when his dog was present in the room during treatment. Levinson believed that animals serve as an intermediate in human history, by returning to emotional and mental health, and enabling a detached person to maintain the initial and vital connection with nature, instincts and his or her inner self.

#### **Animal assistive therapy advantages:**

Children (of all ages) face struggles and challenges in every day school life; they may struggle academically, behaviorally, emotionally, socially, and physically. There are many interventions and strategies to help in these areas; but they are not always effective (Beck 2015). The range of "problems" that are used for such treatment is broad; and the general public is recently coming to know that animals can be used to deal with a large variety of psychological, emotional and general stress related symptoms (Fine 2010). The use of therapy dogs in an educational setting is dramatically increasing and becoming more common (Jalongo et al., 2004). There are many canine-assisted reading programs intervention in schools today; wherein young children (grades 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup>) read to dogs, either one on one, or in small groups. The foundation behind this is that by reading to a dog (or any other nonhuman) the child feels a sense of trust with the animal, knowing they will not be judged, laughed at or criticized (Lane & Zavada, 2014). The bond formed between child and dog can be very beneficial to the child's motivation and attitude toward reading (Friesen, 2009).

#### **Case analysis:**

For the past four years, I have been managing a small therapeutic zoo inside an elementary school, in Tel Aviv, Israel. Apart from managing the zoo, I take care of all animals - physically, medically and emotionally. Developing their environment - filling it with stimulations, making sure their diet is healthy and that all animals are in good condition. We have a veterinarian who comes every month to check on the animals, and if there are any sick animals, we take them to his care. I am a zootherapist and canine therapist, and have been developing an empowerment canine program to small groups of children within eight sessions, inside school hours. I have been working with my two dogs: Zoti - a nine year old mixed breed and, Shiela - a three year old Australian Shepherd; I use Zoti as a "reading dog" and Shiela as a therapy dog. In one of these sessions I came across a young boy (2<sup>nd</sup> grader) who showed great fear of dogs. Ori was physically smaller than the rest of his group, very shy, uncountable and stood outside of the circle.

The Australian Shepherd

The Australian Shepherd is an intelligent working dog of strong herding and guarding instincts. He is a loyal companion and has the stamina to work all day. He is well balanced, slightly longer than tall, of medium size and bone, with coloring that offers variety and individuality. He is attentive and animated, lithe and agile, solid and muscular without cloddiness. He has a coat of moderate length and coarseness. He has a docked or natural bobbed tail. The Australian Shepherd breed began in Europe, near the Pyrenees Mountains. In the early 1800s, Australia's Anglo émigrés began sailing to Australia where they encountered different breeds of collies and from there they left to California. California ranchers admired the Basques' herding dogs and assumed they were an Australian breed—thus the misleading name Australian Shepherd. Later, the breed was refined and perfected in America, have been an iconic part of cowboy culture ever since. Many are still happily herding in the American West, others earn their feed as rodeo performers, and still others of this exuberantly versatile breed work as therapy dogs, drug detectors, service dogs, and search-and-rescue dogs. The Australian Shepherd entered the AKC Herding Group in 1993. (American kennel club 1991)

#### **Therapeutic purpose:**

When young children encounter a new environment or a stranger, they often become inhibited. They are hesitant in exploring their new environment or stranger, resulting in long latencies of responding; children tend to regress to less mature forms of play (Asendorpf, 1985). The therapeutic purpose was to help Ori come over his fear of dogs; by exposing him to the "right" kind of dogs - the type that will not jump on him, lick him or will be too playful at first - such as Zoti. Then gradually expose him to Sheila - which is more intense and playful. The timing was crucial, since as Ori said, when I asked him what frightens him in dogs he answered: "their teeth". That alone made him stay away from all dogs. On our first session, Ori mentioned that a dog jumped him when he was younger and ever since he has been afraid something like that will happen again, thus he avoided dogs all together.

### **Therapeutic sessions:**

Ori and I met inside the petting zoo once a week after school for 30 minutes sessions. On our **1st** session I brought– Zoti, a mixed breed of boxer. Zoti is very friendly, both to people and other animals, especially cats, she lives with five felines and treats them like their mother. Zoti sat far from Ori at first, while I told Ori her story: Zoti had a tumor on her back that was recently removed in surgery; she wasn't feeling very good and now she is all better. Ori immediately sat up and asked if it was cancer? I answered: Yes, then, as if she knew he was feeling sorry for her, Zoti made a sigh which made Ori say: "oh, you poor thing". People who do well on human empathy tests are also measurably better at decoding the emotional sounds of animals (Greenall 2022). On our **2nd** session, I asked Ori if it was ok to bring Zoti a little closer to him? He said yes. I called Zoti and asked her to sit closer to us. We spent the entire session like this, Zoti was in the room, sitting closer to us and Ori kept eye contact with her the entire time. On our **3rd** session, I asked Ori if he wanted to throw her a treat? He said: yes, but from a far. Ori threw a treat to Zoti from a far and she gently ate it while maintaining eye contact with him. We repeated this several times and each time Zoti came a little closer to him until she sat right next to him. On our **4th** session, I asked Ori if he wanted to give her a treat straight into her mouth? He said he was afraid of her teeth. I explained to Ori, that Zoti never used her teeth on anyone, she does not bite and although her teeth look scary, she only uses them to chew her food; and that dog chewing was actually funny... Then, I took a treat and showed him how Zoti takes a treat; she licks my hand and does not use her teeth at all. Ori was brave enough to try it himself. Big laughter surrounded the room, as Zoti's tongue tickled his hand; Ori repeated this several times, laughing from this every time, and then, after feeding her, Ori touched her head, patted her gently, and started talking to her, as if I was not in the room with them. He asked her: "Zoti, you won't bite me right?" and Zoti just looked at him and sighed.

On our **5th** session, Ori walked in the room and sat there with Zoti, making long eye contact with her as I asked Zoti to: "come" and "chin chin", Zoti moved in closer to Ori and gently placed her head in Ori's lap. Ori and Zoti sat like this for the entire session until his older brother came to pick him up and was amazed with what he saw. On our **6th** session Ori and I took Zoti for a walk and every now and then we stopped, gave her a basic command like: sit, hand, and down and gave her a treat. Laughing as Zoti licked his hand while collecting the treat from his open hand. On our **7th** session, I also brought Shiela - my 3 year - old Australian shepherd; she was very different from Zoti - childish and energetic, however, she sat far from Ori the entire session as he maintained eye contact with her while working with Zoti on basic tricks. For our **8th** and final session, we sat outside and I asked Ori if he likes to play soccer, he answered yes and I kicked a ball. Zoti - does not play at all, Shiela, however, is blinded by everything bouncy! Shiela brought the ball back to me waited enthusiastic for me to kick it again, as I did several times and she brought the ball back and so on. Ori was sitting next to Zoti, patting her and looking at Shiela and I playing. Zoti sneezed and Ori jumped. Laughing at himself for jumping from that and came to stand next to me. Ori asked if he can kick the ball to Shiela, I said: ofcourse and Ori kicked the ball. Shiela immediately ran, caught the ball and brought it back to Ori. Ori looked at me, and I said: it's ok, kick it again. He did. For the next 10 minutes, neither I nor Zoti existed. Ori and Shiela bonded like two children and played in their own world. Laughing and running around together, while kicking the ball around like no one else in the world around them exists. It took several minutes until they stopped when I asked and we all sat on the ground together, then Ori got up and sat on Shiela. Playing with her ears as Shiela allowed him (and anyone) to do whatever they want with her.

### **Analysis and evaluation**

Ori was very scared of dogs his entire life, with the right **dog** and approach, anyone can overcome their fear of dogs. The trick is to match the right kind of dog at first and not push the patient, take the right amount of time, and show them their fear is ok, but it is only fear and they can definitely conquer it by dealing with it face to face. I believe that canine therapy was the right kind for Ori, he was not afraid of any of the other animals in our zoo- not even the snake (because: "it doesn't have sharp teeth like dogs") but given the time and attention, even energetic and childish Shiela could reach him and show him that not all dogs will jump you. One of the most important and first things I teach the kids is safety: Never approach a dog before you make eye contact with them, ask the owner if it is ok to approach, get down and not above the dog and only then give the dog the back of our hand to sniff before, if at all, we touch them. Ori learned that the hard way, but realized that he can now safely approach dogs on the street with this code and never fear a dog will jump him again.

### **Implications for the future**

Animals in general and dogs in particular, produces various and interesting reactions in humans: Joy and laughter, constant questions, identification, mercy, contemplation, and most of all – unconditional love! They never criticize us and accept us the way we are: with all our weaknesses, sadness and joy. More than that: animals are always there for us, in our loneliest moments and when we need a sympathetic ear without judgment or opinion. When it comes to dogs, it is an expressive animal that can help treat a large variety of issues. A dog gives us a sense of comfort and trust, strengthens boundaries and self-discipline, cultivate the ability to identify

expressions, needs, feelings and improving social communication skills. (web.md). Different animals are used for different issues, the secret is finding the precise animal for a patient, however, the path to finding the right animal is part of the therapeutic process for both the patient and the therapist. (Schwartz Laufer, 2022)

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