

Project Mantis: Four Weeks with Charlie and the Emergence of a Relational Anchor

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Human-animal interaction scholarship has rarely considered whether an individually recognized invertebrate can become relationally meaningful across repeated encounters. This practice-based descriptive case analysis examines four weeks of Charlie-specific observations involving a juvenile dead leaf praying mantis (*Phyllocrania paradoxa*) and 12 children aged approximately 7-13 years. Source material consisted of contemporaneous practice notes, immediate post-session audio reflections, spontaneous child statements, selected caregiver observations, and records of voluntary interaction. Across encounters, children greeted and requested Charlie by name, remembered and missed him, noticed bodily change following a molt, discussed him at home, and, in one case, described him as a friend in a dream. A child who had repeatedly declined physical contact later independently requested to hold him. These observations do not establish therapeutic causation, clinical attachment, or a species-wide effect. They suggest that repeated, choice-based encounters with the same individually recognized invertebrate can support relational continuity. Relational anchor is proposed as a sensitizing concept for this observed function.

Keywords: human-animal interaction; invertebrates; praying mantis; relational continuity; child-animal relationships; animal-assisted intervention

I. Introduction

Human-animal interaction scholarship has largely concentrated on familiar companion and domesticated species, leaving a basic relational question comparatively underexamined: can repeated interaction with an individually recognized invertebrate become socially and relationally meaningful to a child? The present practice-based descriptive case analysis considers that question through four weeks of repeated encounters with Charlie, a juvenile dead leaf praying mantis (*Phyllocrania paradoxa*). Rather than asking whether praying mantises are therapeutic animals, the analysis examines how one known animal came to function as a stable point of recognition, expectation, memory, and voluntary return across encounters.

Charlie, a juvenile dead leaf praying mantis (*Phyllocrania paradoxa*), was encountered repeatedly by children over approximately four weeks. His importance became visible through recurrence. Children began to look for him, ask for him, remember him, miss him, notice that he had grown, and bring him into conversations outside the immediate encounter. The pattern suggested that Charlie was becoming more than a repeatedly presented animal. He was becoming a known individual to whom children could return.

Naming can alter how humans perceive and relate to other animals by drawing attention to individuality rather than category membership (Borkfelt, 2011). This is especially relevant for animals commonly encountered as anonymous specimens or representatives of an unpopular taxon. Children's attitudes toward less culturally favored animals are shaped by familiarity and experience, and humane-education scholarship suggests that structured animal-focused learning can influence empathy and humane attitudes while producing variable effects across ages and contexts (Ascione, 1996; Ngai et al., 2021; Prokop & Tunnicliffe, 2010).

Animal-assisted practice also requires attention to animal agency and welfare rather than treating participation as automatic. Contemporary frameworks emphasize the interconnected wellbeing of human and animal participants and the need to recognize behavior that signals unwillingness or disengagement (Hediger et al., 2019; IAHAIO, 2018). These principles support an account of relationship in which observation, refusal, waiting, and voluntary return remain meaningful forms of participation.

Related case-based literature has described animals as relational and communicative partners in school-based practice. Helping April Talk described animals as mediators around whom communication could develop without direct interpersonal demand (Schwartz Laufer, 2022). A later case described repeated orientation toward an individually known bearded dragon during periods of distress and the parallel development of practitioner-child trust (Schwartz Laufer, 2024). Project Mantis narrows the question further: what can be observed when the recurring animal is a single praying mantis?

The term relational anchor is used here to describe an individually recognized animal whose repeated presence provides a stable point of return across encounters. The term does not imply attachment diagnosis, therapeutic causation, or a species-wide characteristic. It is a bounded description of a relational function observed in this case.

II. Guiding Question

What observable behaviors and spontaneous statements across four weeks support, qualify, or limit the interpretation of Charlie as a relational anchor within an animal-assisted intervention?

III. Case Approach

Scope and Context

This practice-based case analysis examines Charlie-specific observations recorded across approximately four weeks in an animal-assisted therapeutic setting in the United States. It does not identify the setting or host organization, describe the broader program, or report findings concerning other animals. Project Mantis is the title of the present case analysis, not the name of the broader program. The account is bounded by time, focal animal, and source material and includes only observations directly related to Charlie.

Participants and Source Material

The available field records describe 12 children, approximately 7–13 years of age, who attended one or more documented encounters during the four-week period. Exposure to Charlie varied across participants and weeks; the records are therefore not treated as a balanced repeated-measures dataset. Participant names and identifying details are omitted.

Source material included contemporaneous practice notes generated from the author's immediate post-session audio reflections, written reflections, spontaneous child statements, selected caregiver observations, and records of whether children observed, declined, requested, accepted, or returned to physical interaction with Charlie. Quotation marks are used only for wording preserved in these records; wording not preserved with sufficient confidence is paraphrased. The case analysis does not use questionnaires or claim Charlie-specific pre-post change.

Charlie and Choice

Charlie was described in the field records as a juvenile dead leaf praying mantis (*Phyllocrania paradoxa*), approximately four months old during the observation period. His sex had not been established at the time of data collection. He completed a molt during the four weeks and was visibly larger afterward.

Physical interaction with Charlie was optional. Children could observe without touching him, decline contact, or change their minds later. Charlie's own behavior also shaped encounters; when he did not remain where a child proposed placing him, contact was not forced. This choice-based structure is important to interpretation because child-initiated return and voluntary approach are central to the relational-anchor pattern.

Interpretive Approach

The Charlie-specific records were reviewed retrospectively for direct references to Charlie and the immediate context surrounding them. Descriptive labels included naming, greeting, requesting, observing, declining, holding, returning, missing, remembering, noticing bodily change, discussing Charlie outside the encounter, and anticipating separation. Recurring and qualifying incidents were compared across children and weeks. This was an interpretive practice-based analysis conducted by the same person who participated in the encounters and generated the reflective records; it was not independently coded. Initial refusals and limited engagement were retained rather than treated as failures.

IV. Case Observations

1. Naming and Individualization

Charlie entered the encounters already named. Naming alone cannot produce relationship, but consistent use of "Charlie" gave children a way to refer to the same individual across time. They did not simply ask for "the mantis." They asked for Charlie, commented on Charlie's body, spoke about Charlie between meetings, and in one case explicitly described Charlie as a friend. The name became part of a continuity that accumulated through repeated recognition.

2. Repetition Became Reunion

Across the four weeks, Charlie repeatedly appeared at the beginning of encounters or was requested when he was not immediately present. One child said that she had missed him. The following week she arrived

excited to report a dream in which Charlie was her friend and accompanied her on a vacation. Before beginning anything else, she greeted him warmly and again said that she had missed him.

Another child noticed Charlie first on arrival and immediately requested to hold him. A different child returned to Charlie again before leaving. In a later encounter, when Charlie had not been presented in the usual way, a child independently asked for him and greeted him with the spontaneous statement, “Oh, Charlie, I missed you so much.” These episodes demonstrate remembered expectation and child-initiated reunion. They do not demonstrate clinical attachment, but they do show relational persistence.

3. Voluntary Approach After Earlier Refusal

One of the clearest longitudinal sequences involved a child who repeatedly preferred not to hold Charlie. Her boundary was respected. During a later encounter, she suggested that Charlie stand on a stuffed toy rather than on her hand. Charlie did not remain there, and no attempt was made to force contact.

Near the end of the fourth week, the same child independently asked to hold Charlie. When he stepped onto her hand, she smiled, described him as “adorable” and “cute,” and asked to hold him repeatedly. When asked what had been the scariest part of holding him, she replied, “It wasn’t scary at all... it actually tickled.” The sequence is important because handling was not imposed as the endpoint. Observation, distance, an alternative proposal, Charlie’s movement, and later child initiation were all part of the relationship.

4. Recognition Across Bodily Change

Charlie changed during the four weeks. After molting, he was visibly larger. Several children noticed this without prompting. One greeted him and immediately commented that he had grown. Another child who had only recently become comfortable holding him continued to do so after the molt. To notice that Charlie had changed required some memory of how this same individual had appeared previously. The children were following Charlie across time rather than encountering an anonymous specimen anew each week.

5. Charlie Beyond the Immediate Encounter

Relational persistence was also visible when Charlie was physically absent. One child dreamed that Charlie was her friend and vacation companion. Another discussed Charlie at home and anticipated missing him when the four-week period ended; a caregiver confirmed that Charlie had become a topic of family conversation. These observations are not evidence of a formal attachment classification. They show something narrower: Charlie remained mentally and socially available between encounters.

V. Discussion

Across four weeks, the strongest claim supported by the field records is not that Charlie caused therapeutic change. It is that repeated encounters with the same individually recognized animal created continuity. Children looked for Charlie, requested him, returned to him, remembered him, noticed his changing body, imagined him outside the intervention setting, and spoke about him with family.

This pattern extends earlier case-based observations in the literature while remaining distinct from them. Helping April Talk described animals as mediators within communication (Schwartz Laufer, 2022). The bearded dragon case documented repeated orientation toward one individually known non-mammalian animal and the parallel development of practitioner-child trust (Schwartz Laufer, 2024). Charlie adds a more tightly bounded observation: a praying mantis can become a recognized individual whose repeated presence organizes memory, expectation, reunion, and voluntary return.

The relational-anchor concept is therefore proposed as a sensitizing concept rather than an established mechanism. Its defining feature is continuity with the same individually recognized animal. The anchor is “relational” because its significance develops through accumulated encounters, recognition, memory, choice, and return. It is an “anchor” because the same known individual remains available as a point of orientation across time.

The voluntary-contact sequence is especially important. A child’s initial refusal did not disqualify the relationship. Because refusal was respected, later approach could be interpreted as child initiated rather than as compliance. Likewise, Charlie’s own movement remained part of the encounter rather than being overridden to achieve a handling goal. In this case, relationship was visible not only in touch but also in greeting, watching, remembering, requesting, noticing, and returning.

VI. Summary for Practitioners

Repeated encounters with the same individual animal may carry relational information that is lost when practitioners record only whether physical handling occurred. In this case, meaningful indicators included

greeting the animal by name, asking for him when absent, remembering earlier encounters, noticing bodily change, referring to him between sessions, and voluntarily returning after previously declining contact.

Practitioners should therefore distinguish voluntary relationship-building from compliance. Observation and refusal can remain part of an ongoing relationship, and later child-initiated approach may be more informative than immediate handling. The animal's behavior must also be allowed to shape the encounter. The relational-anchor concept is offered as a practical observational lens, not as a claim that a particular species produces a therapeutic effect.

VII. Limitations

This case analysis is exploratory and bounded by a short four-week period. Attendance and exposure were uneven, and the records were generated within practice rather than through a prospectively designed Charlie-specific protocol. The same facilitator participated in the encounters, generated the reflections, and conducted the interpretation, increasing the possibility of expectancy and interpretive bias. No independent coder, structured observational schedule, physiological measure, or Charlie-specific relational scale was used.

Children's statements were spontaneous and context dependent, and caregiver observations were available only in selected cases. The data cannot determine whether Charlie caused changes in communication, confidence, comfort, or any clinical outcome, nor can they determine whether another repeated relational focus would have produced a similar pattern. The relational-anchor concept should therefore be treated as a qualitative formulation generated from observation and requiring prospective study.

VIII. Ethical and Confidentiality Considerations

This practice-based account is limited to de-identified, Charlie-specific observations recorded by the author. It does not identify the children, practitioners, setting, or host organization and does not use photographs, questionnaires, diagnostic records, or findings from the broader program. It is presented as reflective practice scholarship rather than as a report of a prospectively designed clinical trial or outcome study, and no claim of therapeutic efficacy is made.

IX. Animal Welfare Statement

Interaction with Charlie was voluntary for the children and was not forced when Charlie moved away or did not remain in a proposed position. The analysis treats Charlie's behavior and ability to disengage as part of the encounter. No animal harm is reported in the Charlie-specific field records used for this manuscript.

X. Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

XI. Future Inquiry

Prospective research could examine the relational-anchor concept using systematic coding of child-initiated greeting, requesting, voluntary proximity, remembered details, recognition across change, and between-session references. Independent observation and explicit documentation of animal choice would help distinguish descriptive relational continuity from practitioner interpretation.

XII. Conclusion

Four weeks were sufficient for Charlie to become individually recognizable and relationally persistent for several children. They greeted him, requested him, returned to him, missed him, noticed that he had changed, imagined him beyond the immediate encounter, and spoke about him at home. Some approached him only when they were ready.

Charlie's significance in this case does not establish a therapeutic effect and does not support a claim about praying mantises as a species. It supports a smaller, more precise proposition: within repeated animal-assisted encounters, one individually recognized animal may become a stable relational point of return. That is the function proposed here as a relational anchor.

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