This story is a true account of a boy named Max who was on medication for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and aggressive behaviors. He lived in a group home as a last resort to get help for his negative behavior and in an attempt to help sustain his family unit. Max attained a code 42 in his educational setting and was placed in a behavior modification class. He was oppositional in many ways which eventually warranted him the diagnosis of Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) which is often found co-morbidly with the diagnosis of ADHD. Due to his “out of control” behavior, Max was removed from his school entirely and placed in the school program that was affiliated with his group home. This boy was having much difficulty in all areas of his life when he attended an animal and nature-assisted therapy program in an attempt to get the help he needed. Max attended this unique medium of therapy/counselling for 6 months. Below is an account of his story followed by information on animal and nature assisted therapy.

Max was a tall boy for his age. He was only 12 years old but looked down at me when we first met and with a big smile and laughing eyes said “Hello, I’m Max.” I liked him immediately. He came with a staff who worked in his group home, Larry. Larry extended his hand to me and said, “This sounds like fun, I can’t wait to meet the animals.” Just then, Max bolted ahead of us, running toward one of the animal pens. I shouted to him: “Max, slow down, you can’t run here, you’ll scare the animals.” Max kept running. Larry was right, this was going to be fun.

I ran in the direction of Max yelling things like: “Wait up, hold on buddy, don’t go in there without me.” Larry ran behind me. We reached Max just as he was about to open the chicken coop door. I got ahead of him, pinned myself against the door and said: “Ok, I don’t usually start off like this but there are rules around here. Here’s the one you’re gonna need to know. You cannot run on this property.” Max was almost laughing as he huffed and puffed. As I put on my best smile I said: “You got it? We gonna be able to do this? Cause if not, you’re going back in the car and back to your group home.” Max, still smiling, said: “Ya, I got it. No running.” I threw open the chicken door and all three of us entered like nothing had ever happened.

Max was a boy who was told “no” often. He was used to people giving him ultimatums, telling him rules and trying to hold him accountable to them. From what I knew, he had done the opposite of what he was told enough times to get the ODD diagnosis. Often times, children with the ADHD diagnosis CAN’T listen because they have trouble focusing on what is being said or done in the moment. I did not want to punish or reprimand Max for something he couldn’t control but I had to set boundaries for safety and I was conducting an initial assessment to see what he was and was not capable of
doing. It was a good first start, he was able to acknowledge and repeat back to me what was expected of him.

Once in the coop, Max moved fast. Before I knew what was happening chickens were squawking and flying everywhere. Max was on the chase. Because I was working with a boy with a diagnosed inability to focus and listen to instructions, I squatted down. I had already told him the no running rule but now he was in a different setting and his actions were being motivated by a different reason, plus, he was excited. I didn’t want to repeat myself and set up a pattern where he does something and I tell him he is doing it wrong. I wanted to develop a positive relationship on a different level then what he was used to. Often times, children and youth develop a set of habits for dealing with adults, especially those in authority positions. These habits become very strong and often their actions get the same results from many of the adults that they meet. In order to help Max, I was going to have to react differently to his actions.

I stayed very quiet, crouched on the floor with my head down. The chickens began to gather under my legs. Max was still trying to catch them and almost running me over to do it. I looked up at him and he stopped. He flailed his arms in the air and said “I can’t do it. They won’t let me.” I picked up a chicken that was still seeking shelter from him under my leg and handed it to him. I said: “Be very gentle. You must stay very quiet and keep your hands over her wings. Pull her in close to you.” Max did exactly as instructed and for the first time since he arrived, he quieted. He put his head to her head and felt her soft down with his cheek. He looked peaceful. Then he suddenly dropped the chicken and said “Let’s go meet some other animals.” In my assessment opinion, I believed Max truly did suffer from the symptoms of ADHD.

Although Max walked ahead of us to the large animals, he did not run. I thanked him for this when we arrived at the horses. For a boy with ADHD and ODD, he not only listened to the rules but he also kept his actions under control despite the fact that he was excited and full of unfiltered energy. I thanked him and made a big deal out of it because sometimes these kids only hear what they are doing wrong. In the quiet moments and in regards to the little things, they can hear praise and learn how they are expected to act.

Out of nine large animals who all have unique life stories, Max chose to work with the little paint horse with no ears. Her name was Rain. She had lost her ears to frostbite when she was born and was going to be sold at the horse auction when a kind lady met her and took her home. Due to having no ears, she was misunderstood by the other horses she went to live with and was severely abused by them. When horses flatten their ears at one another, it communicates “go away.” Horses who are less dominant cannot send this message to other horses without having it met by challenge, usually in the form of a kick or a bite. Rain was kicked and bitten lots because she could not communicate properly.

Max wanted to ride Rain right away. “Can I get on? Where’s the saddle?” he said as he began to walk toward the barn to look for it. I called him back and said that he would have to wait for the answer before he went to get the saddle. Max kept walking. Once
again, I followed him and got in front of him. I said “Max, you need to hear me.” He
stopped and looked directly into my eyes. I said “We can’t ride today. You have to get to
know her first.” Max accepted this but demanded to know how he was supposed to get to
know her. I began to gather brushes and hoof picks and hand them to him. Max smiled a
giant smile and speed walked over to Rain to begin his task.

Max began by quickly flicking the dirt off Rain’s side with a couple of strokes of the
brush. Then he said “Ok, done. When can I ride?” Just as I began to tell him that he
needed to get all the dirt off her, Max ran over to the pond area and began to play with
the dogs. I called him back saying “Max, you’re not finished here. Do you want to learn
this so you can ride her?” Max came back. After several more strokes of the brush, Max
repeated his trip to the pond. This was going to be a challenge. With much cueing and
refocusing, Max was finally able to complete the brushing phase but when I told him that
he was going to learn to clean out her feet, he began talking to me about birds. “Birds?”
I said. “Why are you telling me about birds?” Max began to tell me why it was
important for him to tell me about birds. Suddenly, it hit me. He was avoiding. Could it
be that when he doesn’t want to do something or is nervous or frustrated, that he changes
the subject? Runs away to do something else? Doesn’t listen anymore? Could it be that
he has learned that these techniques work and that they serve a useful purpose for him
rather than being clinical symptoms that he cannot control? Hmmm, I wondered.

After several sessions aimed at understanding Max through helping him learn to groom
and saddle his horse properly, it was clear that Max was particularly unfocused
(avoidant?) when it came to cleaning Rain’s feet. Many people are uncomfortable doing
this as it requires lifting up the horse’s foot and cleaning it out while holding it. It is
scary as horses can kick. One day while Max was still in the brushing phase, I decided to
try something. I told him to tell me a story about a dog he once had. Max often talked
about his past dog and I thought it would be a perfect topic for him to converse about
easily.

Max started telling me the story. Just as he began, I ran off to the pond to play with my
dog. When I looked back, Max was still standing next to my horse with the brush in his
hand, mouth gaping, eyes wide. I said “Were you telling me something?” Max began to
walk toward me while restarting his story. I waited for him to get close to me and then I
ran off again talking about the birds that were flying overhead. Max stopped and said
“Why are you being mean to me?” I went to him and held him gently by the arms while I
looked deep into his eyes and said “I am not being mean honey. I am showing you what
you do when I ask you to do something you don’t like or want or feel comfortable
doing.” Max laughed and said “I don’t do that.” “OK” I said, “let’s get back to what we
were doing.”

Max finished brushing with minimal cues and then it was time to clean Rain’s feet. The
minute I pulled out the hoof pick, Max knelt down and began petting the dog that was
“You’re avoiding cleaning out her feet.”
“No I’m not.”
“What are you doing then?” Max put his head down and smiled to himself.

I asked the staff to take the horse away and I knelt down on the ground next to Max and Thorpuppy. I said “It’s ok. It’s something you’re good at. How do you feel about cleaning out Rain’s feet?” Max looked very sad and with his head still bowed he said “I don’t like it.” I told Max that it was ok. That he didn’t have to do it if he was afraid or needed help. That he could ask for help or tell me how he felt and then I could understand. Max said “It’s just scary and I want to ride her but…” His voice trailed off. Max was as still as a statue and for a boy with ADHD he sure was focused. “Max, do you think you could try to work on learning a new habit when you don’t like something, are afraid of it or just don’t want to do it? Do you think you could let me help you with that?” Max shrugged his shoulders. “Do you get in trouble lots because you run away from people who are talking to you?” Max said he did. We talked about his medication and why he was on it. Max said he didn’t like taking medication. I told him that if he learned to tell people how he felt rather than just running away from them or talking over them then he might not need to take as much medication. I explained to him that he really looked like he had trouble focusing on any one thing and that the doctors were trying to help him by giving him pills.

Max sat quietly on the ground with me for the next half hour while we talked about all the areas of his life where he was having trouble, his feelings about not living with his family and his anger that was always just below the surface. Larry stood within earshot with Rain so that he could glimpse the real Max and when we were all done talking, I motioned for him to come over with Rain. Max stood up and stroked Rain’s cheek and in that moment I was profoundly aware of the irony in Max’s animal choice. Rain’s biggest problem was her inability to communicate with others in a way that they could accept her. Huh, I thought, so was Max’s.

Max’s Future Success

Future sessions consisted of Max catching himself avoiding tasks by shifting his and others attention instead of doing what he was supposed to do. Max learned to be aware of when he was using these negative habits and unhealthy coping skills and was assisted to learn healthy communication for his overwhelming feelings. Max’s staff attended most of his sessions and helped him to transfer his learning to his group home and school settings. Max was eventually able to go back home to live and to re-attend his original school although he was still placed in the behavior modification classroom.

About Animal and Nature-Assisted Therapies

Animal and nature-assisted therapies are new to our Canadian concept of counseling. Unfortunately, they have not yet been fully accepted by the medical professions but the research is becoming more scientific and they are now becoming more recognized.

Sometimes children and youth need help because they are cognitively compromised or too afraid, angry or shy to get along with others or succeed in the school
setting. Some children and youth do well with the school counselor or with a play or talk therapist in an office setting and are able to get the help they need in these settings which are plentiful. There is a percentage of children and youth however, who do not fair well in these traditional therapeutic settings. These children may have diagnosed disabilities or mental health disorders, brain abnormalities, behavioral symptoms or many other things affecting their ability to do well in traditional counseling or in school. Animal and nature assisted therapies provide a natural motivation for this population to get the help they need. In a relaxed and natural setting, young people are partnered with a non-threatening, loving animal and a highly skilled human professional.

According to anthropologist Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence and entomologist E.O. Wilson (1984), winner of two Pulitzer prizes, humans are genetically attuned to pay attention to animals and nature due to the fact that we, as a species, evolved with animals in a natural setting. They claim that we have a need to affiliate with other living organisms, that animals and nature optimize our health and bring about positive changes in our behavior and that contact with animals and nature influences our cognition, health and well being. This is the foundational belief behind working with animals in a natural setting to help people in need.

Animal and nature assisted therapies are being accepted in a wider variety of therapeutic settings. More research must be conducted before it is fully funded in our country but it is well on its way. Animals provide unconditional love and acceptance, honesty, immediate responses to our feelings and actions and have a way of putting people at ease in social situations. The research that has been done states that animal interactions can facilitate language, enhance verbal skills, increase attention span and stimulate and improve cognitive abilities in children and adolescents (Nathanson & de Faria, 1994); pet owners have higher self esteem and confidence (Terpin, 2004); interacting with a dog can lower anxiety (Barker & Dawson, 1998); interacting with an animal can reduce anxiety during therapy (Allen, Blascovic & Mendes, 2002); children with behavioral and mental health issues showed an increase in General Functioning scores when an animal was included in their therapy sessions (Schultz, Remick-Barlow & Robbins, 2007); and interacting with animals can improve empathic ability (Ascione, 1992).

Research and anecdotal evidence also clearly identifies that animals can act as a buffer in traumatic experiences, can help people adjusting to serious illness or death of a loved one, can support sexual and physical abuse victims, can reduce Post Traumatic Stress symptoms and can decrease loneliness and depression. Research in this field is ongoing and is becoming more scientifically based. Animal and nature assisted therapies have been in existence for hundreds of years but are only recently being recognized as effective alternate therapies in Canada.

Dreamcatcher has been in operation since 2003. It is run by a Registered Psychologist and currently has 20 fur or feathered rescued or adopted animals all of whom come with their own life story, personal issues and life obstacles. At Dreamcatcher, rescued and once homeless animals who have been specially screened and chosen as co-counsellors are partnering with children and youth to help them overcome their life issues, whatever they might be. Together, young people are healing animals and animals are healing young people.
References


_Eileen Bona is a Registered Psychologist and the Owner/Founder of Dreamcatcher Nature-Assisted Therapy Ltd, a private practice using animals and nature to help children, youth and adults who have disabilities or mental health diagnoses. For more information, visit online: [www.dreamcatcherassociation.com](http://www.dreamcatcherassociation.com)_