

# Nature's Nurturers

*Spot, Rover, and Fluffy put their print on treatment*

by Carrie Bezusko

**N**ine-year-old Matthew\* did not simply dislike dogs. He was terrified of them. Even a dog seen from a couple hundred yards away would cause Matthew to climb tables or trees – or, at times, even to run out into traffic – in an effort to get further away from the animal. What made Matthew's case even more difficult was a diagnosis of autism, a pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) that is often diagnosed in childhood. Eleven-year-old Keith,\* on the other hand, has been diagnosed with AD/HD, which often makes it difficult for him to focus on a particular task or object for longer than just a few minutes.

Matthew and Keith are residents at Devereux's Kanner Center, located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Kanner Center, part of Devereux's national non-profit network of behavioral healthcare treatment programs, services approximately 300 children and young adults, ages six to 21, who have emotional, behavioral, and developmental disabilities such as autism, mental retardation, conduct disorders, and dual-diagnoses. The Kanner Center provides treatments and special education services that these individuals cannot receive at home or through their local schools, since many clients have complex and severe disabilities and have often suffered abuse, neglect, or abandonment.

One of the most unique therapy programs offered by the Kanner Center – indeed, one of the few of its kind anywhere in the U.S. – is the Kanner Nurture Center, a petting zoo that is home to a menagerie of animals, including a macaw

parrot, pot-bellied pigs, baby doll sheep, chickens, chinchillas, rabbits, iguanas, lovebirds, parakeets, miniature horses, pigmy goats, Persian cats, spiny mice, rats, gerbils, hedgehogs, fish, river turtles, peacocks, and a kangaroo. Used as part of the residential therapy program, the animals receive about 60 young visitors a day, children who attend one 45-minute session with the animals per week. In fact, it's part of the children's curriculum, in the same way that their art or gym or computer classes are.



**Maryann Riess with one of her therapy dogs, Chili.**

Maryann Riess, an Animal Assisted Therapist who aids in the direction and upkeep of the zoo, assists the Kanner Center Special Education teachers in developing animal therapy programs for the children, using the animals to facilitate interaction between the children and herself. In addition to more traditional subjects like science, math, and outdoor education, Riess also teaches the children to relate to each other, as well as helping them to develop the social, emotional, and maternal skills they often lack.

The program started in 1991 on Devereux's Brandywine campus. Dr. Aaron Katcher, previously a psychiatrist and professor at the University of Pennsylvania and world-renowned for his work in therapy with animals and children, did a controlled clinical trial at Brandywine which illustrated the inarguable benefits of animal therapy involving a group of young boys with conduct disorders. The subsequent proposal to incorporate animal therapy into the treatment programs was accepted, and thus the first Devereux petting zoo was

*\*names have been changed*



born, a program very similar to the one that now exists at the Kanner Center. Riess and others have since helped as consultants with a Philadelphia school district which now has two zoos of its own, but the Devereux Kanner Nurture Center is still the largest.

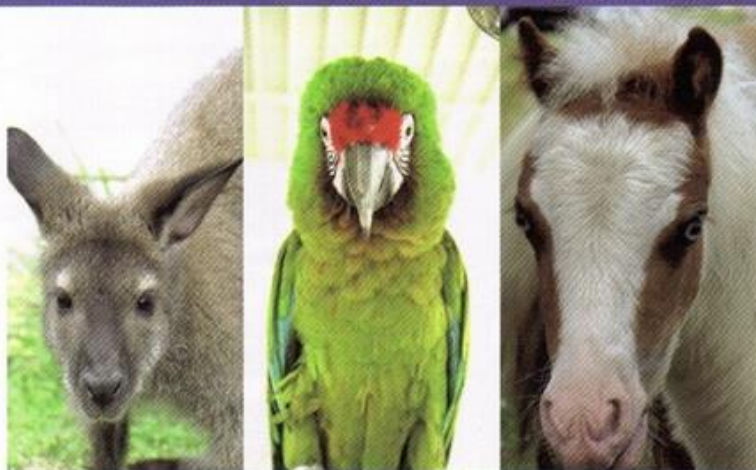
As part of their therapy program, the higher-functioning kids at Kanner assist Riess in tending the animals, working on vocational skills for possible job placement in a pet store or livestock setting. They typically spend anywhere from one to two hours in the zoo, one day a week, as opposed to the typical 45-minute, once-a-week sessions.

For the lower-functioning children, such as those who have severe autism, Riess involves them in animal-assisted therapy, working on eye contact, verbal skills, and, in short, simply trying to get the children to interact with the animals and, in turn, with herself and others. "It's a nice way for the kids to interact with somebody else—and they don't even realize they've actually done it half the time. They have a good time, then they leave, and you realize that they just interacted with you for a good five, ten minutes, rather than secluding themselves in their own little world, as autistic children tend to do. It's a very positive experience for them."

Using hand-over-hand assistance, in which her hand is actually in the child's hand, Riess allows the children to pet the animals. In this way, if a child were to suddenly grab or squeeze an animal, she could stop it before it happens.

Along these same lines, Riess stresses the importance of being well-educated and professional about incorporating animal therapy into a child's program. Animal selectivity is perhaps one of the most crucial elements. In fact, Riess owns, breeds, and hand-raises the standard poodles she uses in the program, training them with high-level obedience. "The dogs are phenomenal with these kids," she exclaims. "They can handle an autistic child who suddenly starts to scream or flap or jump. And the kids just adore them, so I use them a lot."

Perhaps one of the most rewarding aspects of the program involves the children's increasingly positive responses, both towards Riess as well as the dogs. Riess describes it as a kind of "snowball effect." "They tell the dog to sit, it sits. They throw the ball, the dog goes and brings it back. Before too long, they're asking, 'Well, how do I get it to do this?' And the next thing you know, the child's interacting with you in a normal child-adult relationship, which a lot of these children have never had." At the same time, a similar event is happening between the child and the dog. "They're being



**Kangaroos, parrots, and horses, oh my! Clients at Devereux are finding that their fine feathered (and furry) friends are a useful tool in their treatment.**

positive with the dog—not nasty or aggressive—and they get a response from the dog because they're not being negative. The child's behavior is rewarded right away, which makes it even more positive."

As for Matthew and Keith? Over many months of working on "desensitizing" Matthew to dogs—at first, simply letting him stand outside and watch the other children playing with the dogs, to letting him come inside and continue watching, to bringing the dogs closer and closer to him—Riess happily reports that his parents ultimately were able to buy a dog for Matthew. Keith's class came in one afternoon just as a rat was having babies. So Keith, Riess, and the other AD/HD children in the class all pulled up chairs and sat transfixed for nearly an hour watching the rat give birth.

It's encouraging results like these that prove to Riess time and again how essential the Nurture Center is to the lives of the children at Kanner. "The zoo can touch anyone," she asserts, "and I'm very impressed with Devereux for funding it." Indeed, the unflagging support of Devereux and of the community as a whole will allow the program to continue to help these children grow and lead happier, more normal, more fulfilled lives.

*Since 1912, Devereux, based in Pennsylvania, has been providing high-quality human services to children, adults, and families with special needs as a result of behavioral, psychological, intellectual, or neurological impairments. With locations in 14 states, Devereux's services include residential and day treatment, community-based group homes, respite care, inpatient and outpatient care, foster care, vocational training, and more. For information visit [www.devereux.org](http://www.devereux.org) or call 800-345-1292. Accredited by JCAHO, Devereux, customer number #422, has been a CMHC Systems customer since 1997.*