# American Humane's Therapy Animals Supporting Kids (TASK)™ Program: How Animals Can Help Traumatized Children

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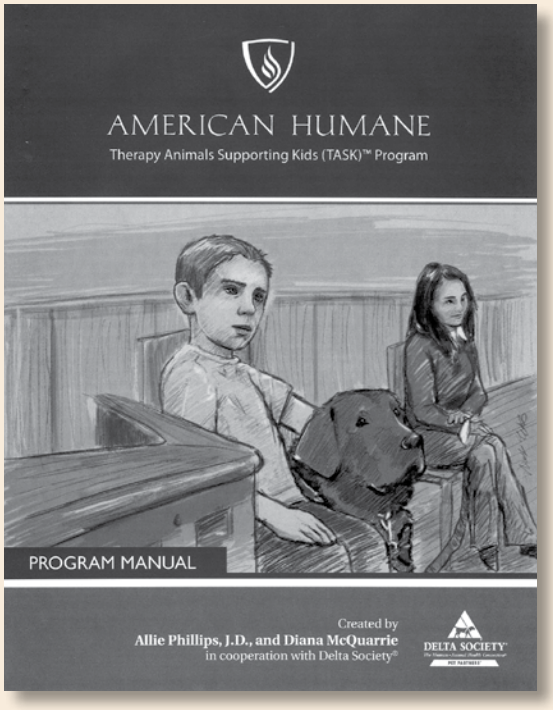
Like most pet owners, I have experienced how therapeutic a pet's unconditional love can be during times of stress. It has not surprised me, therefore, to see many organizations, counselors and health care professionals formally recognize how therapy animals can help people with emotional and physical injuries recover faster.

The American Humane Association has long acknowledged the power of the human-animal bond, and currently trains and provides registered therapy animals to help people in need – especially children who have been maltreated or have witnessed trauma. To further support and advance this work, American Humane launched a national initiative at the 21st Annual Crimes Against Children Conference in Dallas, Texas on August 17, 2009 called the *Therapy Animals Supporting Kids (TASK)™ Program*.

TASK provides guidance regarding therapy animals to child welfare professionals, attorneys and prosecutors, child protection workers, social workers, police officers, and other professionals who work with maltreated children. It is widely accepted that therapy animals can benefit individuals who have suffered physical or emotional trauma. The TASK Program takes this concept one step further and encourages child protection professionals to incorporate therapy animals into sessions with children who have been abused or neglected, or have witnessed violence. When children have suffered trauma, it is often difficult for them to speak of their experiences. Incorporating a therapy animal into the process can help a child open up and promote the healing process.

The TASK Program includes a manual that merges two important areas of expertise: first, the practical issues involving establishing an animal-assisted therapy program and safely working with therapy animals; and second, the legal implications and do's and dont's of effectively incorporating therapy animals in work with children that often entails a difficult court process.

The TASK Manual identifies six situations for incorporating therapy animals into work helping traumatized children, and thoroughly details the benefits, drawbacks, and potential legal ramifications involved with each type of situation. The six situations are: greeting children (at a children's advocacy center or other agency location), the forensic interview or evaluation, the medical examination, individual or group therapy, court preparation and courtroom testimony. The manual features children's advocacy centers and prosecutors' offices that currently incorporate therapy animals to assist children. It also contains sample forms that can be downloaded through the TASK webpage. The TASK concept can also



be expanded to other areas involving children, such as off-site visitation between children and parents and family group conferences.

The TASK Manual was peer-reviewed by nationally recognized leaders in child protection and animal-assisted therapy, as well as agencies that have effectively incorporated therapy animals to benefit child victims and witnesses. The manual has received endorsements from several child protection organizations, including the National District Attorneys Association in Alexandria, VA; National Children's Advocacy Center in Huntsville, AL; the National Child Protection Training Center in Winona, MN; the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse in Alexandria, VA; and the State's Attorney for the 15th Judicial District in Palm Beach, FL, and several children's advocacy centers. It has also been endorsed by Delta Society.

One story featured in the manual comes from the Palm Beach County State Attorney's Office. The office has three registered therapy dogs (Jake, Chloe and Morgan) that help children through the court process. In one situation, Chloe assisted a child who was so fearful of the process she did not want to testify. Once the child realized that Chloe could accompany her, the child relaxed and was able to testify. According to Lorene Taylor, "She was able to tell the adults what happened. It was not easy. Sometimes she gripped the leash until her fingers turned blue. Sometimes she would only whisper to the dog about what she had seen. They all pretended not to watch while she cried into the fur on the dog's back. But she was able to tell what she knew."

**In 2009, Nan Martin and Isabelle, a Newfoundland therapy dog, were named Volunteer of the Year for Alliance For Children (AFC) the Tarrant County Child Advocacy Center and Children's Advocacy Centers of Texas.** They were chosen for this award for their outstanding work and dedication to the families served by AFC. They attend counseling groups twice a month at two locations and assist with the Kids In Court program and individual court preparation when needed.

One time Nan and Isabelle were asked to work with an 8-year-old girl before trial because she was shutting down. When Nan and Isabelle got to the courthouse the girl was very shy and reserved. Nan and Isabelle played some games with the girl to break the ice and then the attorney told the girl that Isabelle had a story about secrets and asked if she wanted to hear it. The girl nodded yes and Nan began to read the story to the girl. When the story was finished the attorney asked the girl if she wanted to share her secret with Isabelle. The girl said yes and proceeded to tell Isabelle her own story. The attorney stated that in that moment she talked more about the abuse then she had ever done before.

This is only one example, but there are many, of the ways that Nan and Isabelle are touching the lives of abused children in Tarrant County, Texas.

As a former prosecuting attorney, I know firsthand how difficult it can be for a child to climb up to the witness stand and testify about the trauma he or she experienced or saw. Animals, especially trained therapy animals, have an innate ability to comfort and calm children and help them through the court process, often resulting in less trauma and better outcomes for everyone involved. And it should be everyone's goal to safeguard the children that come into our care.

For more information about the TASK Program, please visit www.americanhumane.org/task, where you can download a complimentary copy of American Humane's TASK Program Manual. Or email the TASK Program at task@americanhumane.org.

## About the Author

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