

# FINDING A VOICE: ANIMALS HELPING CHILDREN

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*Animal-assisted interventions are used to help children improve their language and literacy skills in a south Texas elementary school whose student population is predominantly Latino. As animals motivate children to improve their communication and reading skills, the children have an opportunity to practice respect and gentleness in their interactions with them. Note: Children's names were changed to maintain confidentiality.*

Esteban, a five-year-old boy diagnosed with autism, is seated at a small table next to educator Kimberly Bradley at Sam Houston Elementary School in McAllen, Texas. On the table is Clementine, a three year-old black rabbit, with her "handler," Catherine Faver, seated nearby. With Kimberly's help Esteban is repeating sentences from a book of pictures and phrases constructed for this session using special computer software. "I pet the rabbit," Esteban says, prompted by Kimberly. Between sentences Esteban leans toward Clementine, bringing his face close to her whiskers, gazing at her face intently, and smiling broadly with apparent delight. "Who's that?" asks Kimberly. "Rabbit," says Esteban. "What's the rabbit's name?" asks Kimberly. "Clem," answers Esteban. During the language exercises, Esteban shifts in his chair but remains focused on Clementine, who commands his full attention!

A little later Clementine sits on her blanket on a table in the school library with Catherine nearby. They are soon joined by a first-grade girl, Lupita, and the teacher who serves as her reading coach. Lupita reads several pre-selected books to Clementine, showing her the pictures as she turns each page. When Lupita finishes the books, her reading coach invites her to pet Clementine. "Have you ever petted a rabbit?" the teacher asks. "No," responds Lupita shyly, as she gently strokes Clementine. As Clementine and Catherine leave the school, they encounter several dogs and their handlers who are arriving to take their turn listening to young readers.

How did these scenes come about? This is the story of the people, animals, and programs that are helping children to improve their language and literacy skills in a south Texas border community.

## **Kimberly's Story**

The desire to include animals in her work with children has been a driving force in Kimberly Bradley's career. "This has been my dream, my passion," she says. At Sam Houston Elementary, her dream is being realized more fully than ever before, but there is much more that she aspires to do. Even before she entered college, Kimberly began investigating the many types of animal-assisted interventions that were being used to help children with physical, emotional, or learning disabilities. Later, while pursuing a degree in communication disorders, she volunteered in a hippotherapy program, where children developed new skills, made positive behavioral changes, and increased their confidence through work with horses.

After completing college and moving to south Texas, Kimberly included animals in her work as a special education teacher. One year she arranged for the K-3 special education students in her classroom to participate in a field trip to a friend's barn where they interacted with horses. The whole project, which entailed an extensive period of preparation as well as the trip itself, included individualized learning goals for each child. On another occasion Kimberly witnessed remarkable changes in the demeanor and behavior of a child diagnosed with autism during

his interaction with a rabbit brought to the classroom. In light of this experience, it is not surprising that Kimberly would later be enthusiastic about introducing a "rabbit team" when collaborating with other educators of children with similar diagnoses at Sam Houston Elementary. But that's getting ahead of the story. First we need to hear from the rabbit, Clementine, who volunteered at Houston Elementary.

### Clementine's Story

The trauma of my early life is better left untold. Although I was fearful at the time, my life took a turn for the better when a man discovered me in his yard, caught me (I was so scared!), and took me to his neighbors' house. The neighbors were kind but couldn't keep me, so eventually I was loaded into a car and taken to Catherine, whose first impression was that I was "gangly but adorable." I was all legs and ears then, but within a few months I was fully grown, sporting a sleek black coat and white markings on my forepaws and left hind foot. In my youthful exuberance I loved to race down Catherine's hallway and jump on the base of her big concert harp, stretching my forepaws up the soundboard as far as I could reach.

In fact, it was surely my charming personality that made Catherine think that we could meet the qualifications to be registered in the Delta Society's Pet Partners Program. As a Pet Partners team (animal and handler), we could volunteer to work alongside human service professionals to "share the physical and emotional benefits of human-animal interactions with people in a variety of settings" (Delta Society, 2000, p. 3; see also [www.deltasociety.org](http://www.deltasociety.org)). To meet the Pet Partners requirements, I had to pass health, skills, and aptitude screenings and Catherine had to complete volunteer training. The training emphasizes that Catherine's primary responsibility as my "handler" is to protect me and the people we meet. In other words, she must ensure that I do not hurt anyone and that no one hurts me. This means that she watches me closely, prevents anyone from harming me physically, and removes me from the situation if I am becoming stressed. After meeting all

the requirements, Catherine and I were registered as a Delta Society Pet Partners team.

### The School, the Children, and the Programs

Located less than 10 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border, Sam Houston Elementary serves approximately 600 students in grades PK-5. Almost all (99.5%) of the students are Hispanic, 89.4% are economically disadvantaged, and 66% have limited English proficiency (S. Casas, principal of Sam Houston Elementary, personal communication, June 5, 2008). Given the school's location near the border, it is not surprising that many of the students come from homes that are predominantly Spanish speaking.

Although 82% of the students at Sam Houston are classified as "at risk" of drop out, the school has been rated as "exemplary" by the Texas Education Agency for the past two years based on the students' performance on state-mandated tests. This noteworthy achievement reflects Sam Houston Elementary School's track record of innovation and extraordinary efforts to facilitate achievement among high-risk students.

Two years before she was employed by the McAllen Independent School District, Kimberly met Denise Silcox, the organizer and leader of the local group of animal/handler teams certified by the Delta Society Pet Partners Program. Thus, after being assigned to Sam Houston Elementary, Kimberly began looking for ways to involve the animal/handler teams in the school's programs. In consultation with the principal and teachers, Kimberly identified two programs at Houston Elementary that seemed especially appropriate for animal involvement. During academic year 2007-2008, the animal/handler teams participated in these programs one day each month.

First, the Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities (PPCD) is designed to assist children who have been diagnosed with various physical, emotional, and learning disabilities, including the autistic spectrum. When an animal/handler team visited with a child in this program, a learning activity was used that focused on the animal and allowed

the child to interact with the animal while engaged in the learning activity. The scene described in the opening paragraph of this article, focusing on Esteban and Clementine, illustrates the kind of work that the animal/handler teams have done with children in this program.

Second, animal/handler teams helped with a special reading program called McAllen Early Literacy Intervention. The children involved in this program typically worked in groups each day with a teacher who served as their reading coach. On the day each month that the teams visited, the children met individually with an animal and handler, along with their regular reading coach. Each child read several pre-selected books to the animal and then had time to visit with the animal. The scene described in the second paragraph of this article, focusing on Lupita and Clementine, illustrates the type of work done in this program.

There is precedent for involving animals in both types of programs. Indeed, a growing body of research has addressed the role of animals in helping children with physical disabilities, emotional disorders, learning disabilities, and other special educational needs (e.g., Fine, 2007; Heimlich, 2001; Katcher & Teumer, 2006; Martin & Farnum, 2002; Nathanson, 1998; Redefers & Goodman, 1989). Only a few studies have examined animal-assisted interventions with children with autistic disorder specifically, but the findings seem promising. For example, Redefers and Goodman (1989) found that when a friendly dog was involved in work with autistic children, the children showed more socially appropriate behaviors. Moreover, in a public school program utilizing a farm setting, Katcher and Teumer (2006) found significant decreases in depression, learning problems, and conduct problems among autistic students.

A relatively recent innovation in the field of animal-assisted interventions is the development of special reading programs in which children read to certified dogs or other animals (Jalongo, 2004, 2005). A well-known example is the program called Reading Education Assistance Dogs, or R.E.A.D., which has been implemented by Intermountain Therapy Animals ([www.therapyanimals.org](http://www.therapyanimals.org)).

The impetus for such programs is research indicating that children feel less anxious and are more motivated to read in the presence of an animal than when reading to an adult or a peer. With lower anxiety the children are better able to learn and to improve their literacy skills (Jalongo, 2005).

### **Responses to the Programs**

Both the Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities and the McAllen Early Literacy Intervention Program are striving to enhance children's ability to communicate and to facilitate their academic success through improving language and literacy skills. During this first year of the animals' involvement in the two programs, no formal evaluation was conducted to assess the impact of the animals specifically on children's achievement. However, the principal and teachers at Houston Elementary have responded enthusiastically to the visits of the animal teams. They believe that the opportunity to visit with the animals helps to motivate the children not only in their use of communication skills, but also more generally in their academic, behavioral, and social development.

In assessing outcomes of children's interactions with animals, the focus is often on whether positive behavioral changes persist over time and generalize to the children's interactions with humans. This focus is important, but we should not limit our assessments to results that are human-centered and future-oriented. Because animals are living creatures, the connection made between a child and an animal is inherently valuable, regardless of its impact on future human interactions. If we recognize that life is a series of moments, then any moment of joy or satisfaction shared by a child and an animal is inherently worthwhile. This was abundantly clear in observing the connection between Esteban and Clementine described at the beginning of this article. In short, shifting our perspective sheds new light on the idea of "results" or "outcomes" of human-animal interactions.

### Conclusions

"Finding a voice" is a metaphor that is typically used to refer to the process of developing and expressing a unique sense of self, thereby making one's own contribution to the world. Communication skills are building blocks in this process because they make it possible for us to connect with others and through relationships we develop and express our identities over time. Animals can help people in the process of finding a voice because they allow us to be fully ourselves in their presence. They attune to our emotional core and stay connected (Lasher, 1996, 1998); thus, in the presence of a friendly animal, we fear neither judgment nor emotional abandonment.

Children from Spanish-speaking homes face special challenges in finding a voice and being heard in U.S. society because the dominant culture discourages the formation and maintenance of a bicultural identity. As an exception to this pattern, Houston Elementary provides a supportive environment for children from predominantly Spanish-speaking homes and the academic success of the student population demonstrates the value of affirming the children's cultural and linguistic heritage. Animals assist in this affirmation process because they are free of language and cultural biases. Clementine responded to the reading of a book in Spanish or in English with equal enthusiasm.

As previously noted, in the implementation of animal-assisted interventions, the welfare of the animals is critical; their physical and emotional well-being must be protected. What is often overlooked, however, is that through animal-assisted interventions, the welfare of animals may actually be enhanced. Through supervised interactions children learn to respect and show kindness toward animals, thus increasing the probability of a better future for all animals. These brief lessons in humane education have potentially far-reaching consequences. Just as animals are helping children at Houston Elementary to find a voice, some of these children may someday use their voices on behalf of animals.

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Comments concerning this article can be sent to: [cfaver@utpa.edu](mailto:cfaver@utpa.edu).



Catherine with Clementine. Photograph by Kimberly Crawford.

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