

## Pathways to Lifelong Mental Wellbeing October 2021

# Animal-Assisted Interventions - How They Can Improve Wellbeing Among Children Facing Mental Health Difficulties at School

Lena Lidfors, Maria Andersson, Laura Hartman

### Background

School dropout is a growing problem that goes hand in hand with increasing mental health issues among young people. For the pupils, longer school absence leads to problems such as anxiety, depression, reduced social contacts and falling behind in schoolwork, making it even more difficult to return to school. In the short term, the consequences can be conflicts within the family and stress for children, parents and the school. In the end, incomplete primary school education leads to challenges and difficulties in working life and may involve costs for society. Changes in policies and practice are needed to facilitate alternative actions for improving the rate of return to school. One important aspect of such actions is to provide a less stressful environment for pupils and good motivators to keep pupils in school.

Animals, together with their handlers, could provide stress relief and be the motivators needed for pupils to return to school. Practical experiences and international research have shown that contact with dogs, horses or farm animals can provide a motivating learning environment and thus be an effective way of increasing the return rate. However, lack of knowledge about research results and practical experiences, worries about allergy and fearfulness regarding animals may make school principals sceptical about introducing animal-assisted education in their schools. In this workshop, knowledge and experience in the field were brought together to discuss questions about how animals can support pupils with mental challenges.

### The Workshop – approach and summary from discussions

The aim of the workshop was to raise different aspects of Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI) for pupils of different ages who need extra support to return to school or to continue going to school. A second aim was to propose practical solutions for how animals can be involved without compromising work environments in

schools or human and animal welfare, i.e., One Health – One Welfare. The third aim was to discuss which policy changes are needed and how health economics is affected.

A total of 25 people were registered for the workshop, and the participants came from eleven different countries on four continents. There were policymakers, researchers and practitioners among the participants, which created variation in the discussions. During the workshop, the participants were divided into four groups in two separate group discussions, and each group was asked to discuss one of the questions provided in the pre-conference report.

### Discussions

The workshop started with two inspirational speakers, Professor Andrea Beetz from the International University of Applied Sciences in Germany and Managing Director Michael Kaufmann from Green Chimneys in New York State, USA.

Andrea Beetz, who has a background as a psychologist and sees children and youth in her clinic, experiences that young people have more mental health challenges today. She talked about why animals, especially dogs, can support pupils in schools and mentioned that today dogs are common in German schools. Andrea Beetz talked about the theories that explain what animals do with humans and presented some research in the area. She suggested a new book on Neurodidactics, which is about how the human brain learns. She presented DOSEOX (Shower for successful learning), which consists of dopamine (curiosity/motivation), serotonin (relaxation and positive mood) and oxytocin (calm and connectedness, social interaction). “A DOSEOX-shower is the neurobiological version and affirmation of settings which promote successful learning – and this is the most important task for teachers” (quote from Brunsting, 2020). Beetz suggested that animals can promote a DOSEOX-Shower for the brain.

Michael Kaufmann started by presenting Green Chimneys (GC) in Brewster, New York, showing a film made by Fox News. Green Chimneys started already in 1947 and is a school for pupils aged 7-18. It is situated in the countryside and houses about 200 different animals, such as horses, cows, sheep, pigs, camels, llamas, chickens, rabbits and smaller animal species. The school also rehabilitates injured birds of prey and re-homes dogs. The school accommodates 200-250 pupils, half of whom live in the boarding school from Monday to Friday, while the rest commute daily. Student expenses are paid by local school districts.

Students coming to GC have different problems, such as autism, attention deficit problems (ADHD, ADD) or obsessive compulsive disorders (OCD). All students in GC have difficulties with emotional regulation and social skills. They train how to live with their difficulties, how to develop coping mechanisms, and how to handle anxiety and anger. When students have failed in regular school and come to GC, they need time. GC offers a nature-based treatment with animals. Traditional therapy and medication are also part of the treatment. The animals are not magic. It takes considerable effort to treat these problems. Students come for treatment and education.



© Jeanette Kobilsek

The animals are important, and animal welfare is important. Teachers must be willing to integrate animals into their education. Many students are fearful of the animals at the outset and need to be trained to interact with animals. Today, many children grow up without animals. Psychologists and teachers may feel they play a secondary role, because the animals play such a large role at GC. Yet the humans are very important and need to be mentioned. Teachers, para-professionals and recreation with the animals are important parts of the programme. Each animal has the potential to connect with people, and the pupils can select which animal they want to be with. This allows the pupil to have self-control. In public schools, pupils are often too limited. The motivational factor of being able to choose is significant. At GC, the pupils live with the animals and have the animals around them all day long; the animals become a part of the community. This gives a feeling of security. Michael Kaufmann finished by saying “I am an advocate for safe animal programmes that are safe for the animals and have safety precaution built in”.<sup>1</sup>

A video produced by CEVA Animal Health on the effects of dogs on children and the need for more research on health economics was shown.

## Recommendations

The workshop discussions were successful and resulted in several good suggestions and actions for the future. A summary of the discussions in the group is provided below.

Some groups discussed the very basis of the animal in relation to humans, talking about what animals really do with us. What was further noted in these groups was that the presence of animals relieves, relaxes, and releases people from the tension and stress of everyday life. The emotions of love, friendship, self-esteem, companionship, emotional support, stress relief, feeling of happiness and calmness are involved.

In some groups, there was an important discussion about the importance of comparing the societal cost of not finishing school with the cost of intervention, and in this way estimating the effect of intervention. Several groups mentioned the need to show improvement in important outcomes: health and education. We need the facts and figures from clinical studies; it is not enough for people to be happy and content. We need studies that compare ordinary counselling with AAI + counselling.

One point highlighted by several groups was that people working with animals need to have knowledge about the animals and what factors can affect their welfare, for example a therapist with a private practice. Further on, in relation to that, it was also mentioned that we need to be aware of the individual animal, and that the animal involved needs to suit the specific participant. We also need to consider the optimal length of time during which the animal works with its task.

Many groups also discussed respect for the animals involved, and the importance of performing some kind of risk assessment and regular animal welfare assessment, including veterinary check-ups.

There were some thoughts about having greater awareness of existing policies (e.g., dogs are allowed in buildings that do not serve food), and the possibility to change a number of policies, for instance by creating dog zones. In relation to this, the importance of international standards was discussed, as well as the importance of also addressing the sustainability of intervention effects.

One group suggested that we should not try to “reinvent the wheel”, but instead use experiences from our own work and that of others in Sweden to complement existing initiatives, the goal being to establish European and International standards for animal-assisted interventions.

Some international aspects were addressed in the groups, for example that in Zimbabwe they have rabbits and chickens in schools and that they will try to implement use of dogs.

The discussions resulted in several calls to action, summarized in the following points:

- We need to compare the societal cost of not finishing school to the cost of intervention. Saving costs is not necessary, if we can show health gains (Quality of Life).
- Individualized interventions: animals should act as a complement, the use of a multidisciplinary team.
- Analyse the learning environment in schools – what can animals add?
- Neurodidactics: information on how human brains learn and on how animals can facilitate learning should be included in education for teachers.
- People working with animals need to have knowledge about the animals; how can this be guaranteed?

## Acknowledgements

This brief is one in a series of eight policy briefs produced as an outcome of the digital 2021 Uppsala Health Summit “Pathways to Lifelong Mental Wellbeing.” Uppsala Health Summit is an international arena for dialogue, exploring possibilities and implementation challenges associated with advancement in medicine and public health. You can find the entire series of briefs and more information about Uppsala Health Summit at [www.uppsalahealthsummit.se](http://www.uppsalahealthsummit.se).

Authors and workshop organisers: Lena Lidfors\*, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU); Maria Andersson, SLU; Laura Hartman, Uppsala Municipality.

\*Corresponding author: [Lena.Lidfors@slu.se](mailto:Lena.Lidfors@slu.se)

<sup>1</sup> See the webpage about GC for more info or e-mail Michael Kaufmann: <https://www.greenchimneys.org/>  
E-mail: [mkaufmann@greenchimneys.org](mailto:mkaufmann@greenchimneys.org)



---

### Sponsors



---

### Partners

