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Animal-Assisted Social, Emotional,

Green Chimneys has provided thousands of children the opportunity to nurture and be nurtured. The goal of the clinical and educational teams is to find experiences in which the children can succeed.

Activities for Children and Behavioral Needs

by Steve Klee, PhD, and Michael Kaufmann



ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT SITUATIONS FOR PARENTS, CHILDREN, AND CLINICIANS is the removal of a child from his or her family. Unfortunately, behavioral and emotional difficulties can sometimes result in a child not being safe in his or her school and home.

It is admission day at Green Chimneys for eight-year-old Seth. Raised in a loving family, his case file indicates that he has ADHD, among other issues. But starting today, Seth will become more than a clinical diagnosis. His unfocused behavior, his inability to make academic progress, and lack of cooperation at school will be accepted as a challenge that he will learn to master. What Seth and his parents can't yet envision is how a farm filled with animals and a very unique interdisciplinary treatment approach will allow him to return to his family and school in two years with a much-improved ability to be successful in his life.

ADHD is genetically transmitted, and symptoms often appear long before a child ever sets foot in school. At home, children may be overac-

Steve Klee, PhD, is associate executive director of clinical and medical services at Green Chimneys. Michael Kaufmann is director of farm and wildlife and the Sam and Myra Ross Institute at Green Chimneys. Green Chimneys provides a year-round therapeutic milieu for children with emotional, behavioral and educational handicaps. There is a full range of social service, clinical and educational programs, including psychotherapy and diagnostic evaluations. The program incorporates the use of a farm as a therapeutic modality, with animal- and plant-facilitated therapy. The school accepts the following conditions: ADD, ADHD, anxiety disorders, Asperger syndrome, emotional disturbances, mood disorder, pervasive development disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and school phobia.

How Working with Animals Can Help Kids with ADHD

The success of an animal-assisted intervention relies on the facilitation of adults who know both the needs of the children and those of the animals. Therapeutic benefits may not always be equally effective with every child. A comprehensive clinical and behavioral evaluation can determine if and how the child could benefit from animal-assisted activities. When conditions are right, typical behavioral challenges faced by children with ADHD can be effectively addressed.

- **INATTENTION.** Most of our students are excited about coming to the barns for activities such as feeding the farm animals. But there are rules in place. In order to help with the feeding the child must pay attention and listen to instructions and must repeat directions before going into a stall and feeding the sheep, for example. Over time, this “focus time” prior to the actual activity supports the ability to pay attention.
- **HYPERACTIVITY.** The injured hawks and owls in our wildlife rehabilitation center are easily frightened by sudden movements. The child participates in their care and must move slowly when approaching these fragile birds in their cages. The child learns to become calm and quiet, and immediately can see when the animal becomes agitated. If the child is too hyper and out of control, he or she is not permitted to approach the wild birds. The child learns to “see” the impact of his or her behavior on others.
- **IMPULSIVITY.** Riding a horse is inherently filled with risk and requires skill. The act of saddling the horse, mounting, riding, and eventually dismounting requires impulse control. The child is motivated to try the activity and recognizes intuitively that there are risks. Exhibiting self-control is a big part of being successful in this activity. Guided by riding staff, children become able to control their impulsivity for longer periods of time.
- **POOR FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE.** Training a service dog puppy can be frustrating at the best of times for adults, so asking a child with ADHD to train a dog may seem counterintuitive. Yet with patient supervision, the child can learn that the distracted young dog is not intentionally frustrating the young trainer through initial disobedience, but that patient teaching from the child will bear results. The child transitions roles from “student” to “teacher” in this interaction and rapidly develops tolerance and perspective.
- **FAILURE TO FINISH THINGS.** Animal care routines have a solid structure. There are set ways and times to feed, steps to cleaning habitats, and ways to handle animals. Every animal care process has a clear procedure that the children learn from start to finish. When

the child participates in caring for the chickens in the afternoon, all of the sequences of gathering eggs, feeding the chickens, and then putting them away for the night have to be completed before the job is done.

- **POOR ORGANIZATION.** The tack room in the horse barn is a very organized place. Every grooming tool, halter, lead rope, and saddle is labeled and has a numbered place where the item is kept. Students are responsible to find all of their own tools and once assigned to a horse, must sequence through the entire pre-riding routine under the guidance of a volunteer. The goal is that the child successfully organizes the process with minimal coaching and reminding. All items must be returned back to where they were found.
- **DIFFICULTY WITH TRANSITIONS.** Day students sometimes show anxiety and refuse to get off the school bus in the morning. Bringing a trained lama or other animal to the bus as an emotional support during the difficult transition can help the child overcome the moment. The animal takes the focus off the transition. The presence of animals can ease other transitions in classrooms or from activity to activity.
- **EMOTIONAL LABILITY.** Many animals are excellent at being the “silent comfort” for a child who is in need of warmth and emotional support. A child who is suddenly sad, unhappy with a peer, or otherwise emotionally fragile can benefit from simply sitting or being with a favorite goat or llama until emotional recovery is possible. The calm presence of the animal and processing time with the animal can stabilize the child’s emotional state.
- **EASILY DISTRACTED.** Carrying a kestrel (small hawk) on one’s fist during a wildlife presentation is a coveted activity among the children. Doing so requires the wearing of a glove, holding the leather jesses that are attached to the small bird, and balancing the fist in just the right way to support the bird. Part of the responsibility is to constantly watch the bird, to stay focused, and to not allow one’s mind to drift. As children become more practiced with the activity, even easily distracted students begin to show the ability to stay on task.



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tive and destructive. They have a difficult time starting things and equal difficulty stopping activities in which they are engaged. Mealtime, bedtime, dressing, and trips to the store can be intense struggles. In school, children with ADHD may be described as disruptive and inattentive. Parents are told their children are not working to their full potential. Homework can be a nightmare, with tantrums and protests lasting longer than the homework itself. By the time a child requires professional residential care, parents, siblings, extended family, and the child have struggled for years through interpersonal frustration, emotional obstacles, academic setbacks, and profound behavioral challenges.

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A unique therapeutic environment

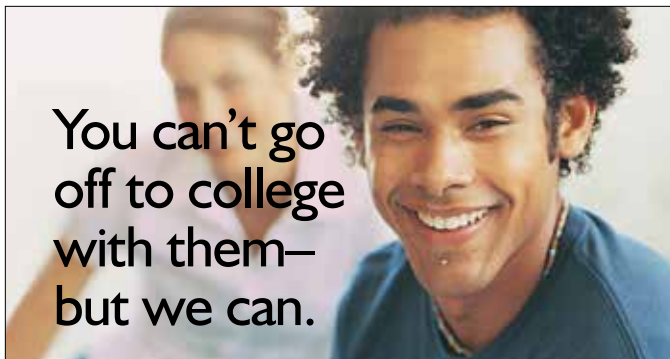
Here’s how it works. Seth will be immersed in a supportive yet structured environment that brings together six hundred clinical and education professionals from many dis-



ciplines and is enriched with three hundred animals ranging from cows, sheep, horses and dogs, to hawks, eagles, and emus. To keep it safe for everyone, a complete staff of specialists facilitates contact between the animals and the children.

Activity is visible everywhere. Social workers, teachers, and farm staff introduce students to a new way of life that provides structure and models respect for all living beings. In the fields surrounding the school, sheep graze peacefully, peacocks roam freely, and children can be seen taking a calf for a walk. One never can tell what child gravitates toward what animal. Seth might respond to the power of the largest draft horse, or he may seek the warmth and comfort of a little bunny. He will not be forced to interact with the animals, but the smell of straw, the soothing sounds of the cows munching their feed, and the inquisitive nature of the miniature horses are irresistible. For the first time in his life, he can experience what it is like to become a trusted caretaker, instead of being a “child with a problem” that adults worry about.

Like Seth, most of the children at Green Chimneys have been unable to succeed academically and behaviorally, or can’t get along with their peers and family. Many feel angry or sad and react impulsively. Green Chimneys has provided thousands of children the opportunity to nurture and be nurtured. The goal of



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The animals at the farm are not a cure by themselves; our entire treatment team works hard on all fronts to support the children in any way we can.

the clinical and educational teams is to find experiences in which the children can succeed. The children need to feel that the adults working with them accept them as they are and believe they have the potential to grow.

Gradually, the children are able to be successful at helping care for an injured hawk; they can participate in feeding the llamas. What comes as a surprise to the children is that the llamas accept them, that the horses are glad to see them, and that the animals do not care about whatever challenges they may have had. They can't help but smile when a curious goat nibbles at their jacket. A child can simply relax in the presence of animals and sometimes for the first time experience what it feels like to be successful at something. That spark of feeling good is then nurtured over time by the staff as the child becomes more comfortable.

But the interactions with animals can have purposeful therapeutic goals. Children are able to take their positive experiences at the farm and transfer them to better school performance, better peer relationships, and greater mastery over their behavior in new social situations.

One of the goals identified in Seth's treatment plan is to strengthen his frustration tolerance. Seth is easily upset in daily life, at school, at home, and out in public, resulting in emotional outbursts, reactivity, and uncontrollable tantrums in situations that most children navigate with ease. In the horse barn, Seth's

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therapist can create subtle situations to counteract these behaviors that require the boy to slow down, to think before acting, and to gradually replace growing frustration with a sense of self-control and achievement.

Being given a halter with instruction to place it on a pony named Spadi may seem like a simple task. But to be successful, Seth must slow his movements in order to gently approach Spadi, manage the halter correctly to place it on the animal, and remain calm, focused, and on task. Being a competitive child and wanting to be successful motivates Seth to halter the pony; he is cooperative and follows the supportive instructions of his social worker. The haltering exercise is not a complete success on the first day, and Seth falls back into old patterns of getting upset. He is reminded by the therapist that a boy throwing an angry tantrum can frighten his equine partner, so the presence of the vulnerable animal can help Seth to control himself in new ways and to start thinking about how others are impacted by his emotions.


In future sessions, he and his therapist will process each time they work with the pony: How did you feel today? How did Spadi feel? Why did it work today and what did not work so well? Allowing Seth to understand the impact of his every move and how he can best function in this situation can allow him to hone valuable life skills that he can apply and use in other challenging situations away from the barn. Over time there will be

visible—and even rapid—improvement in the way Seth manages himself.

Bringing out the best

“We have made a purposeful choice to enrich our campus with animals, plants, and above all, caring staff. That is our recipe for success,” says Joe Whalen, executive director of Green Chimneys. “The animals at the farm are not a cure by themselves; our entire treatment team works hard on all fronts to support the children in any way we can. But when we see how the animals bring out the best in a child like Seth, who has struggled with ADHD and other challenges for so long, we often wonder if there isn’t a bit of magic going on.”

“Learning to care for animals lets all of us connect with the best part of ourselves, the healthy part,” adds Dr. Ross. “A distinct hope of our program is to model how an environment that values animals brings out the best qualities in people of all ages.”

Seth will leave Green Chimneys with his ADHD. It is a lifelong disorder. However, he will also leave with a toolkit full of skills and experiences, and stories of success. His exposure to the animals and gardens will have taught him about taking care of others and much about taking care of himself. The goal is not to eliminate the child’s ADHD symptoms, but to learn how to channel the extraordinary energy, focus, and determination to allow him to reach his full potential. 

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