

The Alpaca Project

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THE BENEFITS humans derive from being around animals is no secret, and in Twin Butte, Alberta in Canada, a psychologist and educational consultant are exploring new ways to use a unique mammal in their therapy programs. Alpacas originated in the mountains of South America and are currently raised throughout North America. A mere three feet tall and weighing about 150 pounds, they are gentle creatures who don't bite or butt, presenting little danger to those who handle them.

After working with children for over 15 years, Mary Cole and Maureen Howard decided that it was time to try something different. Mary is an education consultant and former teacher from Calgary, Alberta, who works on an assessment team at the Calgary Learning Centre. Maureen Howard is a psychologist in Pincher Creek who lives in the beautiful shadows of the Rocky Mountains, not too far from Waterton National Park. Just down the road lies Thistle Dew Ranch, run by George and Darryl Huddlestun. They own over 100 alpacas, along with chickens and goats. After having an opportunity to work with these alpacas, Mary was quick to see the potential of using them in therapy. In

general, alpacas have calm, non-aggressive demeanors, and communicate very clearly both verbally (hums and clicks to name a few sounds) and non-verbally (ears forward, tail up). They are intelligent and can learn quickly, have the "cute-factor," and are a novelty to most people. Their natural "flight" rather than "fight" response, further reduces the risk of any harm when using these animals to work with children. Mary brought together Maureen Howard and the Huddlestuns to work out a plan. Delighted with the interest in their alpacas, the two seasoned ranchers spent many hours with Maureen and Mary, offering their expertise and support. And so, The Alpaca Project was born.

HE WALKED UP TO Reggie and with a shy smile introduced himself. "I'm Sam, and I'm going to be your person." Reggie leaned forward to sniff his face, and Sam's eyes popped open. He ran behind his dad, and peeked out at the chocolate brown alpaca staring back at him.

"Go on, you can touch him if you want," said his dad.

"No, you first dad, he doesn't know me yet," said Sam.

Sam is a delightful and intelligent young boy with enthusiasm and energy to burn. He quickly overcame his shyness with Reggie and soon they were the best of friends. Sam has been diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD), in addition to a learning disability, and one of his main goals was to work on self-regulation. Reggie was the perfect mirror for Sam: every time Sam spoke too loudly or moved too quickly, Reggie hummed loudly and would try to leave the situation.

For example, in one session, Maureen noticed that Sam didn't like the way that the kid goats were always bellowing for their mother. Sam complained, "How come they're so noisy? It's awful the way they yell all of the time!" Maureen jumped on this teachable moment and soon Sam began to recognize what it was like to be on the receiving end of a noisy voice. "Why do you think Reggie is making that really loud humming noise and pulling away from you?" she asked. Sam stopped and looked at Maureen, smiled, and said, "I guess he thinks I'm kind of loud. I'll be quieter."

Sam became upset when his alpaca was not listening. We prompted Sam to use the problem-solving model and said, "Reggie isn't listening very well, I wonder what the problem is?" Sam felt that Reggie should have a time-out for his behavior. Sam was angry with Reggie and felt he should be punished. After some role-playing, Sam recognized that his loud voice had actually startled Reggie and that had caused a lot of the problem. Sam apologized to Reggie and

decided to give Reggie a fresh start. Sam commented, "Reggie's my friend and I wouldn't want to be sent to my room for the wrong reason either."

Over the next three sessions, Sam began to self-check his own behavior and recognized Reggie's non-verbal and verbal signals. We were ecstatic! Sam became more adept at successfully recognizing and responding to his animal's responses. With some verbal cueing, Sam was able to appropriately modify his behaviors and his alpaca rewarded him by visibly relaxing and nuzzling him. His father was pleased to note that Sam was beginning to demonstrate more self-monitoring at home and was attending more to dad's cues to stop and think. He commented, "...I don't have to yell at Sam so much; he's listening more, and paying attention...I've learned to get Sam to pay attention to my facial expressions by saying, 'Look at my face, what I am telling you?'"

Sam's focus extended beyond Reggie, to the ranch as a whole, which included the kid goats, chickens and gophers. One day, he spontaneously related his fear of gophers to Reggie, something which no one had known about. He described his "stomach butterflies" when the gophers got too close. This gave us an opportunity to work on this fear, something which would have been much more difficult in an office setting.

In the third session, Sam's father was taking photos while Sam practiced leading his alpaca. Sam was repeatedly saying, "No Reggie, don't do that! No Reggie, that's not right!" Using a perspective-taking approach, Mary worked with Sam to help him relate his own experiences to the alpaca. He decided that he would prefer that people focus on what he was doing right, rather than constantly correcting what he was

doing wrong. Different language was chosen, which included "please stop," and "good job, Reggie!" Sam's dad noted that he had recently been trying to reinforce Sam's positive behaviors at home and was pleased to see his son practicing the same skill.

Sam completed a scrapbook and showed it to everyone. There was photo upon photo of Sam's big toothy grin and Reggie's warm brown eyes staring back at the camera. The pictures captured that spontaneous laughter and joy that Reggie and Sam shared. Mountains of tape welded the pictures to the page to ensure their permanence. When asked if he thought other kids would enjoy alpacas, Sam exclaimed, "Yes!" Sam's dad commented that he definitely saw a change in his son, and felt that Sam seemed more confident and more willing to try to listen and to stop and think. He enthusiastically stated, "It's a worthwhile project and I hope it continues."

The examples are endless, and the quantitative and qualitative information gathered in Phase I of our research project indicated that it was very successful in demonstrating that alpacas are a viable, effective and unique way to assist professionals in working on a client's therapy plan. The alpaca is stimulating and novel, and it proves to be an excellent catalyst for working with children. The alpaca, used in conjunction with more traditional therapy methods, appears to be a very helpful adjunct to therapy, and we look forward to further exploring the effective use of these fascinating creatures in helping children. ■

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With partial funding obtained from the Rotary Clubs of Pincher Creek and Fort Mcleod, Alberta, the project was designed to see whether alpacas could be used as an alternative to traditional therapeutic interventions for children with behavioral and/or emotional problems. This article outlines the work conducted with one particular family selected from Maureen's caseload.