

Talk and Tails Counseling:

Why I use Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) in my practice

Curbie Oestreich Cohen, LCSW

My sisters were both in college by the time I was 7 years old and all I wanted was a dog to keep me company. As the youngest of three girls, I think my parents were not willing to add another mouth to feed into our house. My husband had a different upbringing, he is an only child and was raised in a house with 2 dogs and a cat. He could not imagine a house without animals and this was one of the many reasons I knew he was the one. Fast forward to the moment my husband and I brought our infant daughter home from the hospital. The first thing we did was to introduce her to her big sister, a Labrador Retriever named Madison.

Many years and many beloved dogs have been part of our family since then. I can say unequivocally that while toys and stuffed animals come and go, the bond my children have with each one of our pets never grows old or is out of fashion. Our two children are now grown, and we currently share our home with two labs, Orson and Fusilli. I am now a clinical social worker, consulting with clients both at the [Larchmont-Mamaroneck Community Counseling Center](#) and through my private practice, [Talk and Tails Counseling](#).

Last year, I was in session with a client from our community who shared that a therapy dog had once visited her son's elementary school classroom. Hearing about the positive experiences those visits generated reminded me how valuable animal-assisted interactions can be for children. Therapy dogs can help create a warm, welcoming environment where students feel supported, connected, and ready to learn. I have seen firsthand the smiles, confidence, and sense of calm that a friendly dog can inspire, making the school day a little brighter for both students and staff.

I began training our younger dog Fusilli with the goal of bringing him to visit students in my community. Fusilli and I are now certified through an organization called Pet

Partners, and have visited all four elementary schools [in Mamaroneck and Larchmont]. We have met students in different grades, with different abilities, and with a variety of exposure to dogs. The experiences have been overwhelmingly positive.

In some classrooms, students practice taking turns asking questions about Fusilli and waiting patiently for a chance to pet him. In others, they build reading skills by sharing their books with their furry visitor. And of course, Fusilli provides plenty of kisses and cuddles for anyone who seeks a little extra love. An unexpected benefit of our visits is the joy they bring to teachers as well as students, offering them a moment to pause, connect, and soften the pace of the classroom.

Of course, there are those students who are allergic, afraid, or simply not interested in engaging in animal-assisted therapy. However, I have found that in most classrooms and situations, Fusilli adds a loving presence that is difficult to put into words.

Fusilli is also present during some individual counseling sessions. In certain therapeutic settings, having Fusilli present can provide support in a way that can enhance the client's commitment to therapy, lessen their anxiety, and provide a comforting presence that can help the client feel accepted and safe.

AAT has been studied widely and the research shows that this modality was just as effective, and in some cases more effective than traditional treatments. In a 2024 study, results showed benefits across areas like physical health, behavior, as well as improvements in anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns.

In an article in Psychology Today, Elizabeth Ruegg DSW, LCSW, writes about how AAT is not a "casual interaction with animals". Ruegg goes on: "The animals can provide support, opportunities for reflection, and a non-judgmental presence that significantly enhances the therapeutic environment." She explains that the client and clinician work towards defined goals such as communication skills, physical connection and more meaningful relationships.

Fusilli and I visited the kids of our district 16 times over the school year. And, in full disclosure, when he is working alongside me, I am the best version of myself—calm, focused, and fully present. Watching him engage with children, teachers, and clients is truly a joy to behold.