



UNSAFE HAVENS I: INVESTIGATION AND PROSECUTION OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION
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This five-day course is designed to familiarize prosecutors with the various stages of an investigation, pre-trial and case preparation in a technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation case.

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 Equal Justice is a five-day comprehensive course designed to meet the needs of frontline child abuse professionals, including prosecutors, law enforcement, medical and mental health professionals, SANE/SART teams, emergency response teams, child protection and child advocacy center staff, social workers and victim witness advocates. Conference participants will be taught by and have the opportunity to interact with many of the nation's foremost child abuse experts.

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NATIONAL ADVOCACY CENTER
COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA

An advanced trial advocacy course focusing on prosecuting technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation cases from opening statements through sentencing.

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For more information about these conferences, see our Web site at www.ndaa.org

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Update

How Therapy Animals Can Help Maltreated Children

By Allie Phillips, J.D.¹

Like most pet owners, I have experienced how therapeutic a pet's unconditional love can be during times of stress. Therefore, it has not surprised me to see many organizations, counselors and health care professionals formally recognize that animals can help people with emotional and physical injuries recover faster.

Throughout its 132-year history, the American Humane Association has acknowledged the power of the human-animal bond. Through its Animal-Assisted Therapy Program, our staff currently trains and provides registered therapy animal teams to help people in need—especially children who have been maltreated or have witnessed trauma. To further support and advance this work, American Humane launched a national initiative in August 2009 called the Therapy Animals Supporting Kids (TASK) Program.

As co-creator of the TASK Program, along with American Humane Director of Animal-Assisted Interventions Diana McQuarrie, I provide guidance regarding therapy animals to prosecutors, child protection workers, social workers, police officers and other professionals who work with maltreated children or child witnesses to violence. It is widely accepted that therapy animals can benefit individuals who have suffered physical or emotional trauma.² The TASK Program takes this concept one step further and encourages child protection professionals to incorporate therapy animals into sessions with children who have been abused or neglected or have witnessed violence. When children have suffered trauma, it is often difficult for them to speak of their experiences. Incorporating a therapy animal into the process can help a child open up and promote the healing process.

The *TASK Manual* was created to help child protection professionals understand the nuances associated with incorporating therapy animals. The *TASK Manual* merges two important areas of expertise: first, the practical issues involving setting up an animal-assisted therapy program and safely working with therapy animals; and second, the legal implications of effectively incorporating therapy animals in work with children that often entails a difficult court process. The *TASK Manual* is available as a free download at www.americanhumane.org/task.

The *TASK Manual* identifies six situations where therapy animals can be incorporated to

help traumatized children, including thoroughly detailing the benefits, drawbacks, and potential legal ramifications involved with each type of situation. The six situations are: Greeting children (at a children's advocacy center, prosecutor's office, or other agency location), the forensic interview or evaluation, the medical examination, individual or group therapy, court preparation and courtroom testimony.

The manual also contains numerous examples of dos and don'ts, including potential legal objections and suggested responses, in each of these six situations. For example, during a forensic interview, **do** allow the child to decide whether a therapy handler-animal team should join him or her in the interview room. If a child agrees to a therapy animal, the interviewer and handler should still be aware of the child's non-verbal cues as to whether he or she appears to enjoy the animal's presence. If the child appears hesitant in spite of saying yes to the animal, the handler should politely excuse the therapy animal and let the child know the therapy animal will be waiting for him/her outside. On the other hand, **don't** tell the child that if he or she comes to the interview room and talks, then he or she can have a therapy animal present. Never use a therapy animal as a bartering tool to obtain a disclosure. A potential objection to including therapy animals during the forensic interview process may be that the presence of the handler inhibited the child from a full disclosure that may have exonerated the defendant. A suggested response could be to have the interviewer, handler or even the child testify that the child agreed to have the handler present in the interview room. The interviewer and handler can further testify regarding the child's outward demeanor and whether the child appeared apprehensive or inhibited as a result of the handler being present. If the interview was videotaped, offer the videotape as the best evidence of what occurred.

For incorporating therapy animals during pre-trial preparation and courtroom testimony for children, the animals can relax the child and provide a sense of security. **Do** ask the child if s/he wishes to have a therapy animal accompanying him/her to the witness stand. However, **don't** let the child believe that a "good performance" on the witness stand is contingent on having the therapy animal available for court testimony. Potential objections to includ-

ing therapy animals in the courtroom may be:

- **Objection:** The presence of the therapy animal and handler in the witness stand will be prejudicial to the defendant.
Suggested Response: The prosecutor should take steps to conceal as best as possible the therapy animal and move the handler as far from the witness stand, but still allow leash control and a visual of the animal to ensure the animal's safety. Just as children in many states are allowed to have a comfort item (such as a doll or blanket) or a support person with them during testimony, the therapy animal fulfills both roles and is less suggestible than a concerned adult.
- **Objection:** The presence of the therapy animal and handler on the witness stand conveys that the child is fragile and needing of protection against the defendant, which conveys a negative image of the defendant.
Suggested Response: This is not a valid objection and does not reach the legal level of "extreme prejudice" or "overly prejudicial." The demeanor of the witness, whether strong or fragile during testimony, is not an objectionable factor since all witnesses react differently when testifying. Therapy animals help calm children; thus, the child will provide more efficient and accurate testimony during questioning. This could help protect a defendant from inaccurate testimony.³

Children's advocacy centers and prosecutors' offices that currently incorporate therapy animals to assist children are featured in the manual. It also contains sample forms that can be downloaded through the TASK Web page. Although the TASK Program encourages child welfare professionals to reflect on whether therapy animals would benefit their agencies and children, it also explains that therapy animals may not be appropriate for all situations or children.⁴

Strategies and practical tips for using therapy animals and stories about how these animals have helped children are included in the *Task Manual*. The Alliance for Children Advocacy Center in Tarrant County, Texas, has several therapy animals, including Willie, a handsome black Newfoundland dog. Willie's first opportunity to assist during a forensic interview involved a 10-year-old girl who had not made an outcry even though her father confessed to sexual abuse. The staff at the Alliance for Children discussed how to help the girl, and that is when Willie was brought in to assist. Willie and his handler, Karen, arrived at the center 15 minutes before the girl was scheduled to arrive. Willie visited the forensic interview room so that he was comfortable with the location. The girl's mother also gave prior approval to have Willie interact with her daughter. Then the moment came for the girl to meet Willie. It was all smiles and tail wags. After 20 minutes of interaction with Willie, the girl was asked if she would like Willie to come to the interview with her. The girl became very excited and was pleased to have Willie by her side. Karen brought an extra leash so that both of them could walk Willie to the interview room. After the interview was complete, the staff and Karen were debriefed. All

agreed that the interview was successful. The girl was able to talk about the sexual abuse for the first time. In the end, although the father confessed, it was important to the center staff for the girl to start talking about what happened. Because of Willie, she was finally able to talk and start the healing process. Most recently, the Alliance for Children awarded Isabelle, a beautiful Newfoundland therapy dog and "co-worker" to Willie, the Volunteer of the Year award to acknowledge the important work she is doing to help children.

The manual also features a story from the Palm Beach County State Attorney's Office. The office has three registered therapy dogs (Jake, Chloe and Morgan) that help children through the court process. In one situation, Chloe assisted a child who was so fearful of the process she did not want to testify. Once the child realized that Chloe could accompany her, the child relaxed and was able to testify. According to Lorene Taylor, "She was able to tell the adults what happened. It was not easy. Sometimes she gripped the leash until her fingers turned blue. Sometimes she would only whisper to the dog about what she had seen. They all pretended not to watch while she cried into the fur on the dog's back. But she was able to tell what she knew."

As a former prosecuting attorney, I know firsthand how difficult it can be for a child to climb up to the witness stand and testify about the trauma he or she experienced or saw. Animals, especially trained therapy animals, have an innate ability to comfort and calm children and help them through the court process, often resulting in less trauma and better outcomes for everyone involved.

For more information about the TASK Program, please visit www.americanhumane.org/task, where you can download a complimentary copy of *American Humane's TASK Program Manual*.

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² Kruger, K. A., Trachtenberg, S. W., & Serpell, J. A. (2004). *Can animals help humans heal? Animal-assisted interventions in adolescent mental health*. Philadelphia, PA: Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society, University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine; Parish-Plass, N. (2008). Animal-assisted therapy with children suffering from insecure attachment due to abuse and neglect: A method to lower the risk of intergenerational transmission of abuse? *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 13(1), 7-30; Serpell, J. A. (1996). *In the company of animals: A study of human-animal relationships* (Canto Ed.). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

³ Mathews, E., & Saywitz, K. J. (1992). *Child victim witness manual*. *Center for Judicial Education and Research Journal*, 12(5), 34.

⁴ The *TASK Manual* was peer-reviewed by nationally recognized leaders in child protection and animal-assisted therapy, including the National Child Protection Training Center and Delta Society, as well as children's advocacy centers that have effectively incorporated therapy animals to benefit child victims and witnesses. The manual has received endorsements from the National District Attorneys Association, the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse, the National Children's Advocacy Center, the National Child Protection Training Center, the state's attorney for the 15th Judicial District in Palm Beach, Florida, and many others.

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