

Kate Nicoll, MSW, LCSW
Founder, Soul Friends, Inc.
www.soul-friends.org
Animal Abuse Task Force
October 5, 2010

I would like to thank Rep Diana Urban and the Animal Abuse Task Force for having the opportunity this morning to share some of our work at Soul Friends, Inc – a nonprofit established in 2003 providing specialized mental health care to children incorporating animal assisted therapy. In our 7 year history, we have served over 4,500 children from every corner of the state including New Haven, Meriden, Hartford, New Britain, Bridgeport and Willimantic. Our group therapy programs successes have been documented in a peer-reviewed journal and positive effect on children's behavior has been shown in collaborative research efforts with UCONN and SCSU. We know that our partnership with animals has a healing effect – and we at Soul Friends plan to prove it.

In sessions of animal assisted therapy children may ask a social worker “Do dogs have feelings?” “Was the cat was asking for it by clawing the furniture?” “What can we do if we can't afford to feed our dog because my dad drinks?” . Children who have been victims and witnesses of domestic violence try to make sense of chaos and , in turn often have confusing feelings about the emotional lives of animals. How can we know then that animals can help children who have witnessed domestic violence? In several studies of sexually abused and traumatized youth, animals have often provided more perceived support to survivors than humans. (Barker, 1995) In addition, pet ownership has been statistically shown to be a significant buffer for traumatized children providing an opportunity for alternative coping strategies. Can low-cost mental health care incorporating animal assisted interventions bring about changes in perceptions for children? Utilizing results based accountability, in a report to the Annie E Casey Foundation, Soul Friends 8 session group therapy program reporting for 12 inner-city New Haven teens demonstrated an increased in an empathy scale for 50% and 66% reported an increased sense of hopefulness. All participants, even those whose scores that did not increase in the hopefulness and empathy scales, 93% reported a positive connection with at least one therapy animal in our group program.

Soul Friends has positioned itself as a proactive leader in this field by being one of handful of programs across the country who has received training by the *Animals & Society Institute* of Washington DC on the efficacy of the Anicare program, a mental health treatment protocol for children who abuse animals or who have witnessed animal abuse. Children who injure an animal are not just demonstrating a symptom. Animal mistreatment is a behavior that requires its own thorough evaluation of severity, motivation, beliefs, emotional intelligence, family history and mitigating circumstances (Anicare Child, June 2005) best completed by a mental health professional . The three children successfully treated under this program have had no further incident of animal maltreatment, and additionally they now understand how the history of family violence impacting their striking out at animals.

Through seven years of practice doing animal assisted therapy, I can firmly say that hundreds if not thousands of stories of how “the link” impacts children are not heard. The numbers of identified cases may be small, but if you bring a therapy animal into any school or clinic setting you will hear stories of animal maltreatment and neglect from we forgot to feed the hamster for two weeks to my dad hit the dog because it went the bathroom in the house, then hit me before I cleaned it up. If you bring up the topic, you might hear a story like this one from a teenage boy in a residential program, John shared how his father in anger threw his cat out of the window and he watched Snowball hit the pavement. The boy understood that his father utilized his emotional connection to the cat – and wanted to in his words “hurt me more than by hitting me”. As he sat petting Bear, my therapy dog, he shared his memories of Snowball and he said : “please help me so I’m not like my dad”. It is an important teachable moment when a “link” story is shared by a child. The identification of animal maltreatment in a child’s life, as either a perpetrator or a witness, allows us a window of opportunity to bring about change in their understanding of empathy, nonverbal communication and cause and effect. The telling of their stories and asking questions allows them to hope for a different outcome and a life without violence. And my belief is their interaction with a therapy animal allows them an opportunity to change.

The “link” of violence happens in thousands of homes across our state. These children have often given voice to their wish to break the chain. “ Please teach me what dogs like” “please show me how to make the horse feel safe”. The underlying message for us to hear is - teach me and show me how to live without violence. Even the children who have been the perpetrators of animal mistreatment ask: “ Can animals help me?”. and the message for us to hear, help me stop. Our state’s challenge is will we listen, will we support results-based programs that demonstrate an effect in improving children’s empathy and break the chain. This task force has laid a foundation for understanding how domestic violence and animal maltreatment impacts families. The children’s voices and pictures have asked for change and treatment – the question remains will we listen.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kate Nicoll". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Kate" and last name "Nicoll" clearly distinguishable.

Kate Nicoll, MSW, LCSW
Founder and Executive Director
Soul Friends, Inc
300 Church Street, Suite 105
Wallingford, CT 06492
203-679-0849