

# Homeless and abused children benefit from animal-assisted therapy

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Researchers at MIRI have completed a pilot study that used guinea pigs and rabbits as therapists to teach children who have experienced domestic violence situations empathy and coping skills. Credit: Erna Vader

(Medical Xpress)—There were almost 32,000 substantiated cases of severe abuse, neglect and violence in Australia last year with some children dying as a result. According to the Australian Institute of Criminology, the age group most likely to be murdered is 0-12 months.

One particular group amongst the homeless cohort is women with children fleeing violent domestic relationships and living in transitional housing. Essentially these mothers and children are in hiding.

It is known that children who experience [traumatic events](#) early in life, particularly abuse and violence, often develop social, emotional, health

and [behavioural problems](#) as adolescents and adults.

Researchers at the Monash Injury Research Institute (MIRI) have recently completed a pilot study that used animals, such as [guinea pigs](#) and rabbits, as therapists to teach children who have experienced domestic violence situations empathy and [coping skills](#).

WAYSS, a registered not-for-profit community based agency in Southern Metropolitan Melbourne region provides [family violence](#) and homelessness support services and transitional housing for women and children. Since 2005, they have been providing the [Animal Assisted Therapy](#) group run by Empathy Educations & Training (EE&T).

While anecdotal evidence indicated the children who attended the groups showed dramatic improvements in their lives, WAYSS approached the Child Abuse Prevention Research Centre (CAPRA), a specialist unit in MIRI to conduct a two year pilot program to determine whether the program was in fact of benefit. The study was run by Dr Neerosh Mudaly, a Senior Research Fellow.

Children are assessed and prepared for entry into the program by a WAYSS Children's Case Worker and they are transported to the program by WAYSS. The group program is managed by EE&T. The guinea pigs and rabbits, used in the program are carefully chosen and their temperament and health are managed by EE&T. The group caters for up to 10 children, who attend weekly sessions of 1-1.5 hours. The children engage in a series of activities which include animal handling (grooming, comforting), animal care (feeding and observing) and art and photography that complement the activities.

According to Dr Mudaly, children who come to the program often do not trust adults. They do not respond to traditional counselling as they are often filled with persistent fear. They may be sad, withdrawn or

acting out in aggressive ways.

"These behaviours can make it difficult for the children to settle at school – often resulting in the child either being bullied or becoming a bully," Dr Mudaly said.

"In the group, the children recognise that they are in charge of a vulnerable being such as a guinea pig. They learn empathy and control – and often take these lessons back into their own families where perhaps they bullied their more vulnerable younger siblings."

Dr Mudaly said repeated experiences of gentle, calming contact with small animals in a safe environment appears – from the [pilot study](#) – to have had a dramatic effect in helping children heal from abuse and violence.

"It may also help break the cycle of violence and abuse that these children may carry into adolescence and adulthood," Dr Mudaly said.

Eleven children participated in the pilot evaluation, and the results validated a more rigorous evaluation. According to Dr Mudaly – if funding is found – the next phase of the study would involve in-depth interviews with children, their supportive parent, caseworkers and teachers. Psychometric measures of trauma and empathy will be administered at entry and again at completion to provide concrete evidence of changes in the children.

"This research has the potential to contribute to international knowledge on effective therapy for traumatised [children](#) and the prevention of violence," Dr Mudaly said.

## **Case study:**

Dr Mudaly talks of one five-year-old girl who witnessed terrible violence towards her mother when the child was injured during one of these episodes.

"When she came into the program she was mute, did not speak for months and would not leave her mother's side," Dr Mudaly said.

The first words she spoke were to a guinea pig in the animal therapy program: "what's your name?"

A year later Dr Mudaly saw the child again.

"She was flicking her long hair, talking about how she might work with animals when she grew up. She had so much to say and would not stop talking," Dr Mudaly said.

Provided by Monash University

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