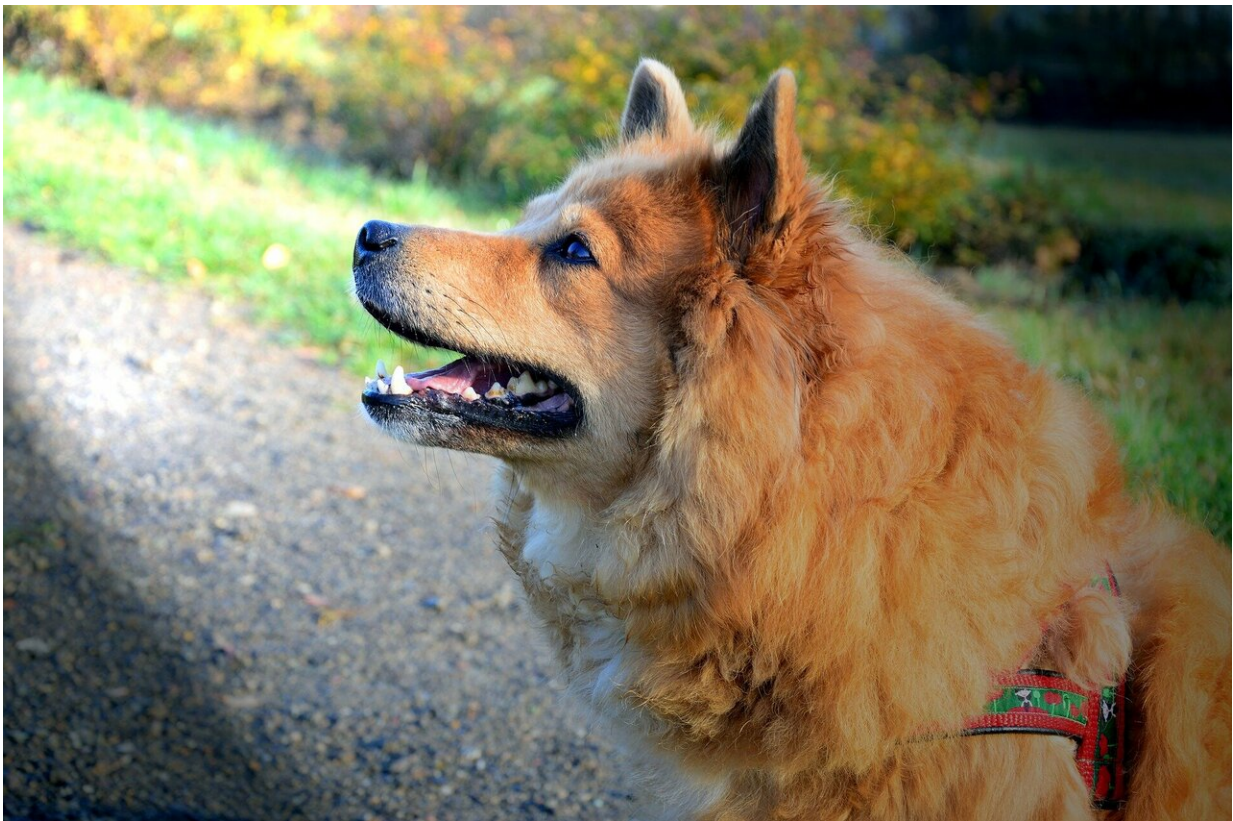


'Co-therapist' dogs and ponies to help boost mental health of pediatric patients

October 19 2020, by Beth Reese Cravey, The Florida Times-Union, Jacksonville



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

In training as a therapy animal since she was just months old, Gypsy the miniature horse is now 6 and brimming with confidence.

"Gypsy is a sassy, spunky, loveable, affiliative little girl," said owner Jenny Pfeiffer, a nurse manager at Nemours Children's Specialty Care Clinic in Jacksonville who has been involved with animal-assisted therapy for 15 years.

Next year Gypsy will be among a contingent of therapy animals being used in mental health counseling at Nemours, helping to boost [pediatric patients'](#) spirits. Pfeiffer was one of six Nemours health practitioners who completed the year-long Animal-Assisted Therapy in Counseling post-graduate certificate program, a new collaboration between Nemours and the University of North Florida.

They will apply what they learned in Nemours' Assisted Dog and Pony Therapy, or ADAPT, program that Pfeiffer founded. ADAPT is "the first of its kind in the U.S. to apply clinical animal-assisted therapy in a multispecialty pediatric medical environment," according to Nemours.

The therapy animals will help counselors address pediatric patients' "mental and emotional health needs, including anxiety, anger issues, grief and loss, behavioral and family relationship concerns, communication difficulties, depression and emotional adjustment to medical issues," according to Nemours.

"ADAPT makes the animal our co-therapist," said Nemours clinical psychologist Lisa Schilling. "This allows us to use new techniques and give kids a sense of having more control over their visits. So when you have the opportunity to groom an animal or to play with an animal or to lead an animal around, it gives you a whole new set of skills that you can then take to your medical appointment."

Cathrine Christie, associate dean of UNF's Brooks College of Health, called the partnership groundbreaking.

"We are bringing animals to patients and making a difference in their health," she said.

Pfeiffer said the UNF certification was the logical next step for her in animal therapy. In addition to her work with Gypsy and her two Great Danes, she is on the boards of several animal therapy groups, written many animal-assisted activities policies for health care organizations and conducted a research study on animal-assisted activities interventions.

"I am an animal advocate and lover and firmly believe in the power of animals to help in the healing process both emotionally and physically," she said.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, Pfeiffer and Gypsy held lunch-break "meet and greets" in the Nemours lobby with patients, families and staff.

"When therapy animals visit, healing gets a little easier. The smiles on the faces of the kids in our care seem to back that up," according to Nemours. "Our patients and their families have a better experience overall and their results are often better, too."

UNF's certificate program, which is open to any mental health provider who wants to use animal-assisted therapy in counseling, is the brainchild of instructor Carlene Taylor, a licensed clinical mental [health](#) counselor. There is also a course on animal-assisted therapy available to any UNF undergraduate or graduate student.

She said she has witnessed the connection between humans and [animals](#) in her walks across campus with her therapy dog, Eli, and in her private counseling practice.

"The animal can often bring something out of the client that we as therapists alone cannot do," Taylor said.

The UNF-Nemours partnership will continue as a pilot patient therapy program, "harnessing the power of the human-animal bond to help kids heal from physical, emotional and/or psychological illness or injuries," according to UNF. The pilot program will have equine therapy sessions once a week and canine [therapy](#) sessions three days a week beginning in early 2021.

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