

No Matter What Creed or Breed: Animals Teaching Tolerance

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Purpose:

To teach at-risk youths in grades 6-8 tolerance, nonviolence and improved interpersonal skills by incorporating registered therapy animals in a weekly after-school Club sponsored by a community nonprofit organization.

Program Description:

Per its motto, the Club promotes respect for all living things *no matter what creed or breed* with therapy dogs serving as *mentors* for real-life situations. Members study different dog breeds as a bridge to understand human cultural diversity while images of pit bulls, Afghan hounds and the *Taco Bell* Chihuahua promote discussions about stereotypes and discrimination. Students learn dog verbal and nonverbal communication as a fun way to enhance interpersonal skills. Lessons on positive dog training teach members to *praise the positive and ignore the negative, forgive and forget* and that *nothing in life is free*. Members practice clicker training on dogs and each other to improve conduct as well as anger management.

Outcomes:

Beginning its fourth year, the Club grew from three to more than 40 students. Many participants live in single parent or foster homes. Approximately one-in-four present learning disabilities. Students comment that the Club is a safe place *where everyone is treated the same* which is why several students disclosed incidents of child abuse and suicide attempts to the therapy dog handler rather than to school officials. The Club provided students a means to discuss feelings about loss after the World Trade Center attack and the Shuttle Space Columbia accident. Students felt uncomfortable talking about the human toll of the tragedies but freely expressed concerns about their *pets* perceived sadness, shared ways to console their animals and, thereby, how they could help each other, friends and family through crisis.