

# **Animal Assisted Therapy and The Bowlby Center for Animal Assisted Therapy**

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Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) is a psychotherapeutic method aimed at improving aspects of personalities or delayed development, in children and adults. Among children and adolescents, this therapeutic method takes advantage of the natural curiosity and the interest in the world of nature (Wilson, 1984) which is used to stimulate and develop youth requiring nurturing and growth (Berger, 2006).

Theoretically and methodologically, AAT is based on the principles of Play (Pellegrini, 2009, Graham, K. et Burghardt, G., 2010) and Play Therapy for children (Luzzi & Bardi, 2009, Parish-Plass, 2013).

Animals are a very powerful stimuli, and a professional therapist knows how to mediate between animal activity and the child who has developed social and emotional difficulties related to environmental dysfunctionality either family or others (Vasen, 2004). The result is a change in a child's development and progress. The treatment gives him the support and strength to develop as a normative adult.

(Melson, 2001) In many cases, treatment helps the individuals adapt normative behavior which in turn helps them avoid anti-social and criminal situations.

Since the last sixty years until today, professional documentation has been added, that proves through theoretical development and systematic studies, the effectiveness of AAT. Many children and adults found treatment orientated petting zoos a rich and effective means of helping them overcome deficits. (Levinson, 1969, Marino, 2012, Melson & Fine, 2006, VanFleet & Thompson, 2010).

The "*Bowlby Center for Animal Assisted Therapy, Educational and Rehabilitation Activities*" was founded in 2000, and today it's a leading center in Israel and has vast professional experience in the field. The therapy sessions take place in Bowlby

Center's branches, in separated areas of zoos, in which animals are adapted to the characteristics of the therapeutic work. The treatment space includes a room or clinic that allows the working conditions required. During the treatment period, weekly sessions are undertaken, combined with meetings with the child's parents, and with others professional factors in the community. Team of twenty-five therapists, who are knowledgeable and experienced offers, in different regions of Israel, individual or group treatments. The "Bowlby Center" is also a training and educational institute that directs and manages basic and advanced studies for Animal Assisted Therapy and also specific training courses for psychologists, social workers and educational teams.

Dealing with the "Corona crisis", with its implications for all aspects of life, required the team of therapists to address and create special techniques, different from normal work. The crisis erupted about six months ago and is still happening, therefore, it is not yet possible to draw far-reaching conclusions about it. However, some of the events associated with it in the field of AAT can be noted and characterized. In Israel, the first wave of pandemics was accompanied by a complete cessation of all civic activity, including psychotherapeutic treatments of all types and methods.

Under these conditions, the physical distance of the patients from the zoological spaces in which the psychotherapeutic activity had developed up to that time, specifically affected the treatment methods. The lack of direct contact with the animals, and missing the stimuli characteristic of the Zoo, emptied the framework of its essential characteristics. Despite the inherent difficulty, therapists sought creative ways to maintain contact with their patients. They tried to make the animals accessible to patients, using various tools to preserve the continuity of treatment. Indeed, the relationship was maintained in an online connection. Whenever possible, the therapists held in their hands and in front of the screen, the animals familiar to children, and together they sang songs, sharpened riddles, played and told stories. Many times, the animals cannot be brought to the screen, so they are symbolically present. Through children's responses to these stimuli, it was possible to get an impression of their emotional state, the difficulties they are facing, and to influence in some way the content that the children brought to the online meeting.

During the quarantine period the therapeutic staff continued with team professional meetings (on-line) and supervisory work. The main theme in that frames, was the creation and formulation of therapeutic strategies designed to enable patients to process their experiences and feelings they have gone through during the unconventional period of time. After two months of completely cessation of normal activity, therapeutic activity returned to the familiar framework- that is to say - to therapeutic sessions, once a week, in the zoological space.

The children returned to treatment. It should be noted there was almost no dropout. The therapists expected that in the renewed framework, the children would bring immediately to the treatment, expressions of fear and/or anxiety that they had felt recently, in relation to breaking the routine in the academic and social frameworks, to the exposure to messages and sights in the media related to the negative impact of the "Corona", and so on. (National Association of Scholl Psychologists, 2020) Contrary to the caregivers expectations, most of the children, in the first session after returning to AAT treatment, did not refer at all to their experiences at home during quarantine, and expressed a strong desire to meet their familiar and beloved animals, pet and play with them.

The zoological space was given renewed life through the activism of the children, their voices, their curiosity, each according to his style and personality. They sought to exhaust in the "here and now". Some of the children moved from cage to cage, from the fish aquarium to the reptile room, from the safari area to the rodent center. They were interested in the condition of all the "residents." of the place. Their behavior was seen as conducting an "inventory count". The children who were able to express themselves freely verbally, accompanied the encounter with the animals, with shouts of joy and even surprise. They marveled that unlike what they had been through themselves, the animals continued to maintain their lifestyle, without significant changes. Their circle of life has developed in its normalcy: the black sheep gave birth to two lambs, the snake "Rafi" had squinted again and its skin looks shiny, the beige hamster was not in his cage ... he's dead, the meerkats ran around and hide as

usual...It was clear that these young patients referred to the zoological space as a source of joy and trust. Suddenly reality and the world took on the appearance of normalcy.

Only after a few initial sessions the children began to bring to therapy their inner world, their experiences, their difficulties in the new format of life, the conflicts created in the intense relationship with parents and siblings, lack of leisure frameworks and distance with extended family members and fantasies related to what the virus caused. As part of a return to normalcy, the therapeutic setting has become an intermediate space, (Winnicott, 1971), a bridge between the inside and the outside, between reality and fantasy, between there and then - versus here and now.

Unfortunately, the second wave of the epidemic is approaching us and threatening again. In AAT an important goal related to the near future is to help our patient maintain and adhere to a routine of normalcy as much as possible. Some children are already mature for developing a kind of integration in the current circumstances of their lives, while for other children the dissociation is the protective mechanism they need to maintain themselves. The professionalism of the therapists and the zoological space will be once again, powerful tools to help everyone with their needs and abilities. The time will come for understanding and insight into what is happening to us in the current period...

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