

# MS. CLAIRE'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

A CANINE ASSISTED  
EDUCATIONAL  
INITIATIVE



BY KARI DUNN BURON

**I think the 'Claire Buron Project', as we have come to call it, began years ago when I read about the positive effects of dog ownership.**

I began thinking that if owning a dog could lower a person's stress level, and if just petting the dog could release pleasurable hormones, then maybe a dog could help calm highly anxious students with autism in a school setting. By profession, I worked with ASD students on a daily basis; I knew their difficulties with language, with socialization, with sensory issues. I witnessed the huge amount of stress and anxiety these students lived within daily. Could canine therapy help them?

## **THE JOURNEY BEGINS**

Sometimes life has a way of bringing you the answers you seek, and two events occurred in 2004 that brought our puppy training program to life. In May I had the pleasure of visiting the Orion Academy, a private high school program for students with Asperger Syndrome in California. The school uses puppy training as a way of teaching nonverbal social communication to students. Hmm, not only could such a program focus on relaxation, I

thought, but also on nonverbal social communication. Later in the year a colleague gave me a 1995 article from a presentation at the 7th International Conference on Human-Animal Interactions titled "Relationships Between Young People with Autism and Their Pets" by J. McNicholas and G.M. Collis. The article indicated that pet therapy could benefit individuals with ASD in learning relationship-building skills, such as proximity seeking, greeting, giving and receiving comfort, sensitivity and play. It was this article

that prompted me to add a third goal to my puppy project outline: relationship building.

In January of this year, my wonderful husband gave me a beautiful yellow lab puppy for my birthday. He named her Claire, and our program began to unfold. Claire and I enrolled in the Twin Cities Obedience Training Club, starting with the Puppy Socialization class and then moving on to Level One Obedience. Claire was fortunate to have a wonderful teacher, Danielle Muellner, for her obedience class who not only made the class fun for both of us, but also helped me understand the strategies involved in slowly shaping the behavior I wanted to see. I decided to train Claire myself in tasks that were specific to my autism program objectives.

## THE PLAN

After about 3 months, Claire had acquired basic obedience skills and I had trained her in enough different program tasks that we were ready to start working with students in a classroom setting. Arrangements were made for Claire to visit a self-contained elementary autism program located in Otter Lake Elementary school in White Bear Lake, MN. The CID (Communication and Interactional Disorders) Program consists of 15 students with ASD in 3 classrooms from 6 different school districts. The children are highly anxious and many demonstrate explosive and aggressive behavior. We also partnered with Courage North in northern Minnesota, to work with students there. Courage North is a summer camp for youth with Asperger Syndrome sponsored by the Autism Society of Minnesota. Parents of all the children who would be involved in the pilot programs were contacted for permission and to ask about any fears or allergies we might encounter.

Specific program goals and activities were designed for Claire and the

CID program students in the areas of Relationship Building, Nonverbal Social Communication and Relaxation. (See Sidebar). Visuals were incorporated to prepare students for Claire's arrival and support student understanding about the program. Two Social Stories™ (Carol Gray) with accompanying pictures were written to support the students' understanding of "Claire Day" and the schedule and activities.

We also made a Claire Day sign for the therapy room door, a list of things to do with Claire, a sign with words that make Claire happy, and Claire's very own 5-point scale for students to rate her energy and activity levels.

### Claire's 5-Point Scale

- 5 = Too high! Not following directions
- 4 = High energy but following directions
- 3 = Walking or standing, looking and listening
- 2 = Sitting down, mellow.
- 1 = Sleepy. Laying Down

Claire and I spent an average of 6 hours a week working with the students in the CID program over a period of 4 months. The program's sensory therapy room was used for 1:1 time for each student and Claire. I initially assessed the student's abilities and responses to Claire and then created individualized

task lists and visual choice boards to use for each session. Sessions varied from 15 to 30 minutes depending on the level of student interest and engagement. The student's communication system was utilized for all of the sessions (verbal, Picture Exchange Communication System or other assistive devices). When possible, I grouped students and structured social turn-taking games. An example of a game we played was "Guess Claire's Favorite Toy". I took photos



of several toys available to Claire and made a visual illustration and then put all the available toys in front of Claire. I instructed students to "Look at Claire, guess her favorite toy." Well, Claire will always choose the tennis ball when given a choice, but most of the students guessed their favorite toy (usually the bubbles). This provided a great opportunity to have students watch Claire's behavior again to see what she is looking at and make a second guess.

I did all of the instruction for this pilot project with the assistance of some wonderful Educational Assistants. As the project progressed, several teachers joined us to observe their student's responses. My long term goal is to have the program run independently without me once initial training takes place.



# Claire Buron Puppy Training Program Goals & Activities

## Relationship Building

- 1:1 interaction with students
- petting and brushing
- Claire throwing the ball for Claire to retrieve
- taking Claire for walks
- taking pictures of students with Claire (to build emotional memories)
- using the Picture Exchange Communication System to request activities with Claire
- playing with bacon-flavored bubbles

## Nonverbal Social Communication

- using nonverbal (ASL) signals to give Claire directives including sit, down and stay
- practicing facial gazing by getting Claire's visual attention before giving the signed command
- looking at Claire to be sure she is attending prior to giving the command
- checking Claire's body language to be sure she is happy and still wants to play
- teaching the students words that make Claire happy (good girl, yes!, and OK)
- teaching Claire new skills from her homework list (from the Canine Good Citizen Test)
- observing Claire's behavior and guessing her favorite toy

## Relaxation

- using the 5-point scale to rate Claire's behavior and prompt her to lay down
- using the weighted blanket and the "calm puppy" hold to help Claire calm down when she gets too excited
- having students guess where Claire's "engine" is (from the Alert Program) using the low, just right and high scale
- having students observe Claire's breathing when she is worked up and again when she is calm
- using touch to calm Claire and to increase student's feelings of well being

## DON'T EAT THE DEER POOP!

The Relationship Building objective was by far the most successful at both the elementary school and later at camp. The social motivation to be with Claire surpassed my greatest expectations. I had always considered myself at least moderately fun to be with, but now both students and campers rushed to greet us whenever Claire and I were present.

The teachers at Otter Lake reported that their verbally limited students were bringing the "dog picture" to them to request time with Claire. One little girl, who rarely speaks, took her teacher's hand and said, "Out, dog, now!" indicating that she wanted to leave her classroom and go see Claire. Several camp counselors reported that their campers



would participate in non-preferred activities for a chance to go visit with Claire. One student, who was highly motivated by the opportunity to play with Claire, invented new games for Claire to play, including the rope ball catch and the squeaky toy turn taking game.

Two of the students, and then later several of the campers, gained new skills by working in pairs with Claire. They worked on turn taking and what might be called 'parallel socialization'. My goal

during these times was to create opportunities for the peers to interact and hopefully enjoy each other's company. One story worth telling involved two students who were taking Claire for a walk in the early spring. The girls were sharing by trading off the job of holding the leash. All of a sudden, Claire saw and began to eat some deer poop (ever present in the spring in Minnesota). I said in an exaggerated voice, "Oh no! Claire, don't eat the deer poop!!" Well, we all three just laughed and laughed. Two weeks later we were about to take Claire for another walk when one of the girls, who is quite echolalic, said, "Claire, don't eat the deer poop!" Then the other girl, who uses many visual prompts in her school program said, "She needs a sign!" So we made a sign. The experience was social, fun and engaging for all of us, but most importantly between the two girls.

## CANINE COMFORT

"When someone is having a bad day, be silent, sit close by and nuzzle them gently." I remember reading this some time ago in a paper titled "If a dog was the teacher you would learn stuff like..." The author is unknown but the wisdom lived on within our program with Claire.



At the start of the program there were 4 students at the school who were afraid

to visit Claire. In the beginning we had these students just watch Claire from a distance. When they felt comfortable, we asked them to throw the tennis ball for Claire to retrieve. An interesting observation was that Claire seemed to sense their reluctance. When she would retrieve the ball, she would stop about three feet from the anxious student and nose lift the ball back to him. Everyone who witnessed this was amazed at Claire's "sixth sense". Claire often went over on her own to students who were having a tough time. She would just lie down next to them and let them pet her. Remarkably, she began doing this early on when she was only 4 months old.

The students enjoyed helping Claire relax when she would get really excited about her tennis ball. Putting a weighted blanket on her, rubbing her tummy and holding her tight were some of the ways they helped her to relax.

## LEARNING TO WATCH CLAIRE

The children who worked with Claire at the school and at camp also achieved the nonverbal social communication goals we created for the program. Students and campers both loved to use the "Chuck it" (a toy used to throw the tennis ball). This toy, once it was mastered, helped the students throw the ball farther and demonstrated for them the importance of having Claire's attention prior to the throw. If she wasn't looking, she often ran off in the wrong direction. This activity became Claire's favorite and was later used to teach Claire to retrieve in the lake at camp.

Teaching Claire to respond to signs rather than just verbal commands turned out to be a favorite activity for the students. It demonstrated for them that using too many words with Claire only confused her; showing her what you wanted always worked the best.



## THE FUTURE

Overall the program was a success with students at both the CID Program and camp, and Claire has been invited back to each setting. The potential for this type of program is great. Puppy therapy provides a warm, natural, engaging avenue for students to develop social skills, practice language and communication and become more comfortable with peers. Claire became a topic of conversation among students and that helped them use their newly acquired skills outside of direct program time.



We continue to expand Claire's roles and work out new activities and objectives for the students. Claire is will be one next month and she and I continue to take obedience classes.

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Claire - con't. from pg. 41

I would like to stress to all interested in undertaking such a project that while I am a trained autism specialist, I did not have any significant prior experience training dogs. I read several books on dog training and using Labrador retrievers as helping dogs, but most of all, I gave Claire lots and lots of time and attention. The commitment cannot be taken lightly and at times both Claire and I were exhausted.

I am so very proud of Claire and am often in awe of her insight and gentleness. She forms connections with ASD children in ways that challenge my 'education' about autism and how to best teach these kids. It's an ongoing learning process for all involved. Claire has added so much to my life - she has truly become a friend and colleague.



**BIO** **Kari Dunn Buron** is an Autism Resource Specialist for ISD #916 in White Bear Lake, MN and has worked with individuals on the autism spectrum for over 25 years. She is the founder and coordinator of both the ASD Certificate program for educators at Hamline University and Camp Discovery (a camp for youth with Asperger Syndrome). Kari is the author of *When My Autism Gets Too Big*, a co-author of *The Incredible 5-Point Scale* (both published by the Autism Asperger Publishing Company), and is currently co-editing a textbook with Dr. Pamela Wolfberg, *Educating Learners on the Autism Spectrum: Translating Theory into Meaningful Practice*, to be released in 2006 by AAPC. Kari welcomes comments at [Kdunn434@aol.com](mailto:Kdunn434@aol.com)

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