

Pet Therapy



Therapy Dog Teddy



Therapy Dog Alex



Therapy Dog Toby



Therapy Dog Greta

One of the highlights of their stay for residents at Midwest Center for Youth & Families is visits with therapy dogs and their handlers. Jan Koutelas with Teddy (Shetland Sheepdog) and Alex (Pug), Jo Belleville with Toby (Yorkshire Terrier), and Justine McMahon with Greta (German Shepherd), have all been trained and qualified through Therapy Dogs International, and provide pet therapy sessions.

"In order to qualify to be a therapy dog, first and foremost, the dogs need to have the proper temperament around people, children, and other dogs," shares Koutelas. "The dogs are then trained in basic obedience (sit, down, stay, come when called), trained to react properly when loud noises or distractions present themselves, and trained to react properly around medical equipment (wheelchairs, crutches, walkers). Finally, the dogs must refuse food and liquids on the floor or when offered by an individual other than the handler. Therapy Dogs International requires the dogs to pass each item of a thirteen point test in order to qualify, and also the dogs must be up-to-date in all their veterinary exams, tests and vaccinations. "

In recent years, the benefits of Pet Therapy have become more widely understood and appreciated, especially in the mental health field. According to PAWS for People, a non-profit organization which trains and certifies Pet Therapy teams, the tangible health benefits of Pet Therapy include lowering blood pressure, improving cardiovascular health, and decreasing overall physical pain. Patients also enjoy a variety of mental health benefits, which include decreased depression and anxiety, diminished feelings of isolation, loneliness, and alienation, and improved communication and socialization skills.

"At our pet therapy sessions, we let the dogs do what they do best," shares Koutelas. "Teddy and Greta prefer that the residents pet and talk to them, while Alex and Toby like to fetch toys for the residents. The dogs' handlers talk to the residents about the training which our dogs go through in order to become therapy dogs. We also talk to them about our dogs, including their name, age, and breed. We also explain breed characteristics, such as how the breed was developed, where it originated, and proper care for the particular coat type. Finally, we ask the children about their own pets."

Midwest Center for Youth & Families

1012 W. Indiana St., Kouts, IN 46347 | 888-629-3471 | www.midwest-center.com

While the benefits to residents are clear, the handlers and dogs also enjoy their sessions, and get a lot of joy from the residents interacting with them.

“Hearing laughter from the residents and seeing smiles on their faces when they pet, hold, or hug the dogs is really gratifying,” says Koutelas. “Dogs love unconditionally and the residents benefit from having this unconditional love in their lives. So many times, the residents tell us, ‘There’s my favorite dog!’, ‘This makes me so happy!’, and ‘This is my best day!’ They cannot wait for our next visit.”

“The benefits of Pet Therapy support the concepts taught in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and provide an opportunity for residents to practice their DBT skills,” says Midwest Center Clinical Director Jeremy Pape. “Focusing completely on the dogs encourages residents to practice being mindful, and the dogs provide a safe environment where residents can share their emotions non-judgmentally. Pet Therapy sessions also allow residents to use their interpersonal effectiveness skills while interacting with each other, the dogs, and the handlers.”

To find out more about pet therapy, visit the Therapy Dogs International website: www.tdi-dog.org.