



Ardrossan, Alberta, T8G 2C4    Ph: (780) 809-1047    Fax: (780) 809-1046  
Email: [info@dreamcatcherassociation.com](mailto:info@dreamcatcherassociation.com)    Website: <https://www.dreamcatcherassociation.com>

## Fish Therapy?

Written by: Eileen Bona  
53044 RR #213 Ardrossan, Alberta  
T8G 2C4 780-809-1047  
[eileen@dreamcatcherassociation.com](mailto:eileen@dreamcatcherassociation.com)

I am a children's therapist and work mainly with young people who are hard to reach or who have trouble engaging in traditional types of therapeutic mediums. As a result of the unique populations I work with, I partner with animals in my practice. We are a team of 38 with 35 of us being once homeless, rescued, injured or ill animals who are now helping others to heal.

I began doing Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) seven years ago and like many of us in the field, I thought I created the idea. I trained with people who had done their AAT training in the United Kingdom and the United States as those countries are far beyond Canada in working effectively with animals in a healing medium. To date I have worked with hundreds of children and youth through the medium of AAT.

For many years I have been doing presentations about the benefits of animals and nature on the human condition. There is much documented research that provides evidence to support the physical, cognitive, social and psychological benefits of partnering animals and humans. It has been found to be an effective helping medium.

Recently in a presentation with Psychologists from Japan I was asked: "What about fish? Can you work with fish in therapy?" Immediately the research about aquarium tanks sprung to mind. There is much research in this area. In Indiana, Purdue University conducted a study on the effects of colorful fish aquariums on Alzheimer's patients. Edwards (1999) reported that Alzheimer patients who were exposed to colorful fish in aquarium tanks were able to focus on the tanks for up to thirty minutes, appeared more relaxed and alert and consumed up to 21 percent more food than they had before the introduction of the fish tanks. The study also showed a decrease in behaviors such as wandering, pacing, yelling and physical aggression. Typically, these patients were reportedly difficult to feed due to either lethargy or hyperactive behaviors.

Another "fish therapy" method that I immediately thought of was Dolphin Assisted Therapy (DAT). Dolphinariums have been therapeutic mediums for people with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Depression, Anxiety, Pervasive Developmental Disorders and many other disorders. DAT has reportedly been conducted with a variety of ages, illnesses and diseases, including cancer. The results report an increase in the human immune system for cancer patients, an increase in learning capacity by 2-10 times for children with Autism or Down Syndrome and a 50% improvement in retention within a year of the therapy for children with learning disabilities (Baxter, 2008). Many of the studies claim that there is an increase in endorphins in the human brain while swimming with dolphins and that the therapy is therefore relaxing and results in an increase in positive mood.

DAT is a controversial form of therapy and has been criticized for its expensiveness, dangerousness and abuse to the dolphins. Marino (2007), a researcher at Emory University, states that: "DAT is bad for People and for Dolphins". She claims that there are no long term studies that have proven the effectiveness of DAT, and "five studies [reviewed] for efficacy of DAT were invalid" (From Ezine @rticles website).

I am also aware of two other types of aquatic animals currently helping people in the United States. I am sure there are hundreds but I will lastly mention these two. One is a sea turtle who was rescued due to a large dent in its shell. This turtle lives in a large indoor aquarium where it is fed and cared for by wildlife specialists. The turtle is gentle and is helping children with disabilities. In one case, a boy who was born without legs visits the turtle weekly and with assistance, feeds and grooms the turtle with a large brush and other assisted devices. It has been reported that this therapy has helped the boy to engage in social tasks,

to develop his upper body strength and has resulted in an increase in his self esteem and confidence. Another fish that I am aware of is a stingray who works with children with disabilities. In one case, it provides motivation for a boy with Cerebral Palsy to get out of his wheelchair, make the painful climb up the many stairs to the aquarium center, stand while preparing food for the stingray and continue standing with support while he feeds it. The intent of this therapy is to provide the motivation necessary to encourage the boy to build his leg muscles. Reportedly this boy has experienced an increase in his leg muscles, ability to walk, self esteem and confidence.

So after I tell my colleague from Japan everything I know about fish in therapy, he says: "What about a goldfish in a bowl? Could you work with that in therapy?" At first I laughed and then I started to think about it. Here is what I came up with (but first I must say that goldfish do not do well in bowls. Betta fish do. They can survive the small unfiltered environments and stagnant water. That's why goldfish in bowls die often).

Well, a fish in a bowl. Imagine working with a youth who believes that nothing he does will ever change his life for the better. Perhaps he is depressed or has lived out his life in group care settings being moved around often with no choice of his own. Perhaps he has developed a "learned helplessness." He is in your office and you have a fish in a bowl. Does the fish have a choice about his environment? Can the fish change it? Watching a fish swim around in a tiny bowl may elicit feelings from a youth who has these life circumstances. Drawing his attention to it in a therapeutic way may be beneficial in helping to validate his feelings of helplessness but also may help him explore choice options that he does have in his life, unlike the fish.

How about a person who limits his or her choices in life? Someone who perhaps has anxiety disorder or lack of confidence and as a result does not take chances or steps to move ahead and they are asking for help to do so? The myth is that a fish will grow to the size of its tank (not true in most cases). Discussion around the size of the bowl that the fish lives in can be an analogy to the opportunities the fish has; the smaller the bowl, the lesser the opportunities. Deciding how big our bowl will be is up to us. Exploring the pros and cons of different "sizes of the bowl", whether we are alone in the "bowl", whether there are things to do in the "bowl", and what might happen if we move into a bigger "bowl" with more inhabitants and things to do are all areas that might be discussed as a way of helping the client perceive his or her life situation and decide whether to change it. Therapeutically we can draw analogies to pretty much anything to get our points across. We can also tell stories about people, animals and/or situations.

I have decided that there is much to be accomplished by having a fish in a bowl in a therapeutic setting.

## References

Baxter, J. (2008). Dolphin Assisted Therapy and Down's Syndrome.

[http://EzineArticles.com/?expert=Jaime\\_Baxter](http://EzineArticles.com/?expert=Jaime_Baxter).

Edwards, N. (1999). Animal-Assisted Therapy and Nutrition in Alzheimer's Disease.

*Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 24 (6), 697-712.

Marino (2007). Dolphin 'Therapy' A Dangerous Fad, Researchers Warn. *ScienceDaily*

[http://www.sciencedaily.com /releases/2007/12/071218101131.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/12/071218101131.htm)