

A THERAPIST'S BEST FRIEND



Laura Skelding AMERICAN-STATESMAN

At the Moore-Weis Children's Center in Austin, children get the chance to interact with dogs from pet therapy group Divine Canines. Rees Sexton, 3, feeds snacks to Miles with the help of speech therapist Julianna Dykes. Occupational therapist Julianna Padilla and Abigale Peña, 4, wait their turn.

Dogs get special training to help kids and adults deal with disabilities

By Claire Osborn
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

The dogs came dressed for the holidays, with bells on their collars and red jackets strapped to their bodies. The children weren't sure whether to laugh or cower.

It took about 20 minutes for the boys and girls to tentatively reach out their hands and slowly

pet Dooley's back or let Miles gobble a treat from their palms.

The dogs are part of a pet therapy group called Divine Canines that was visiting the Moore-Weis Children's Center of Austin, where half the children have some form of autism, said Julianna Dykes, a speech therapist at the school and the owner of Miles.

The pet therapy group was started by Austin

lawyer Tori Keith to help children and adults dealing with developmental or mental disabilities and people who don't have access to pets, such as nursing home residents.

Dog owners who volunteer for the group take their pets for weekly visits to the Austin State Hospital, the Moore-Weis center, Helping Hand

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Home for Children and the Pflugerville Care Center, among other places.

"We work at the Austin State Hospital and train with patients so the dogs get used to linoleum floors and unexpected circumstances," said Keith, who started the group in 2004.

"We work with a lot of people who are very severely mentally ill and pull a dog's tail and yell. ... Sometimes we bring treats for the dog and the patients will eat the treats," Keith said.

Barbara Kelly, director of communications for the Austin State Hospital, said the patients love the dogs.

"A patient had been here for several weeks and hadn't said a word, but when one of the dogs visiting with the handlers came, that patient talked to the dog," Kelly said.

About 20 dogs of various breeds are part of Divine Canines, and they must go through a five-week training program.

"The behaviors that the handlers and dogs have to come in contact with are some of the most difficult, more complex environments you can put a dog in," said Paul Mann, who trains the dogs at the Lee Mannix Center for Canine Behavior in Austin.

When the dogs began visiting the Moore-Weis center in Central Austin in September, Dykes said, the children often ran away, yelling and crying. Now, they get excited when the dogs visit each Friday, Dykes said.

During a recent visit, three groups of four children walked into a room and visited with four dogs: Miles; Dooley; Mattie, a Pomeranian; and Smore, a cocker spaniel.

The kids, aged 2 to 7, wouldn't touch the dogs at first, but Dykes got them to relax by answering questions.

"Does the dog have teeth?" Dykes asked. "Yes. They are plastic," one girl said.

Everyone laughed.

"How many times do you want to brush Smore?" Dykes asked a boy.

"I want to brush him 50 times," he said.

Another child walked under Dooley's belly while the greyhound was quietly standing up.

Juliana Padilla, an occupational therapist at the school, said the dogs have helped the



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For children at the Moore-Weis center, playtime with dogs helps develop their social and motor skills. Therapist Julianna Dykes helps 7-year-old Tyler Lasseter give Dooley, a greyhound, a rub. Both the dogs and the owners have to go through training to be part of the pet therapy group.

children learn how to sit still and practice motions that they may have difficulty with, such as smoothly moving their hands to pet a dog from head to tail.

Judy Kjelland, the owner of Smore, said she

thought she got more out of bringing her dog to the visits than the children.

"I get lots of smiles," she said. "It's amazing how dogs can light up anybody's face."

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