

Man's best friend is doctor, therapist too

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TWO years ago, Girish Murthy, was a chatty boy, like most eight-year-olds. Only, he liked to talk to himself. Whether during classes or at lunch-break, he'd converse aloud, alone. A typical case of autism, diagnosed the psychiatrists.

So he was admitted to Saraswathi Kendra, a special school for autistic and dyslexic children in Chennai. But he showed little improvement. Until, a new

"doctor" walked into his classroom. It was "Dr Jumble", a dog. The mongrel would sit quietly in the classroom while Girish hollered out his English lessons.

"Girish slowly became fond of the dog and started playing with him. For the first time, he spoke to someone (other than himself) in the classroom. He asked Jumble if he wanted curd rice. We were really thrilled to see the change in him," recalls the principal, Marlene J Kamdar.

Now, after two years with Dr



DOG THE STRESS-BUSTER

Jumble, Girish is back in a regular school.

After the initial success with Girish's batch, almost all the 175 children of Saraswathi Kendra, between 5-18 years, are now being "treated" by the "Dr Dogs" of the Blue Cross of India, which launched the first-ever dog therapy programme in the country two years ago.

Though the programme was simultaneously launched in all the metros in India during the animal welfare fortnight in January 2002,

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Man's best friend is therapist too

With support from Animals Asia Foundation, the "Dr Dogs" of Chennai are perhaps the busiest, with children waiting for weeks for their "appointments". As many as 25 dogs, mostly friendly Labradors, have been "certified" as doctors by the Blue Cross. And on duty hours, the animals wear black "Dr" tags while their owners wear the "Dr Dogs" t-shirts.

"It is extremely important to ensure that the dogs are good with children and the dog-owners have to be involved too. In fact, these dogs have to be certified by an authorised veterinarian before they are used for therapy," says Vasanthi Rajiv, the Blue Cross volunteer and co-ordinator of the programme.

The children jab the "Dr Dogs", tug at their tails, but the "therapists" remain amazingly cool. "These dogs are extremely friendly and do not react violently to the children's playful and, at times, rude behaviour," she says. In fact, before the dogs are sent out for therapy sessions, they are put through a tolerance grill — a group of four to five people tug at the dog's ears, body and tail, to check its reactions.

A favourite at the school is Dr Baggio, a Labrador, who bounds in at least twice a month along with his owner, Subbaravan. "I like Baggio, He is sweet. I pull his tail, he no sh...," grins a school-girl, Akila, tugging at Dr Baggio's fat tail.

The dog therapy programme was first conceived in Hong Kong in 1991 by Jill Robinson, the founder of the Animals Asia Foundation, who wanted to rehabilitate thousands of pedigree dogs abandoned by their owners. And Robinson's Golden Retriever, Max, became the first "Dr Dog" in Asia.

"Animal therapy has been around for a long time. But this is the first time we are experimenting with dogs and dyslexic children," says Kamdar. In fact, it is the Saraswathi School, run by Dr Chinni Krishna, chairman of Blue Cross of India, Chennai and his wife, Nandita, which first decided to experiment with dog therapy. And the couple's Daschund, "Dr Cleopatra", was the first "Dr Dog" of Chennai.

Most children, suffering from dyslexia, autism and schizophrenia, are uncommunicative. "It was difficult to draw them out. But we noticed that they communicated well with dogs. The children cuddled the dogs, talked to them like a friend and even recited poems to the animals," says Kamdar. Now, Blue Cross is sending its "Dr Dogs" to other special schools in the city as well.

Dogs are big stress-busters for terminally-ill patients including the HIV-infected too. The YRG centre for HIV positive people makes use of dog therapists to help both the patients and the hospital staff cope with the trauma.

"More than the patients, our staff, especially the counsellor, are under tremendous stress. So, I decided to bring my dog, Lara, to the hospital to give them some moments of distraction and joy," says the hospital director, Dr Sunithi Solomon. However, not all hospitals in Chennai are convinced of the "efficacy of the dog therapy". For instance, the Cancer Institute in Chennai recently turned down the Blue Cross offer to send the "Dr Dogs" to the hospital. "The hos-

pital authorities were nervous that the dogs might pass on some infection to the patients. We could not convince them that the dogs were home-reared and free of rabies and other infections," says Rajiv.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dyslexic kids

I AM a counsellor and special educator from Mumbai. I have been working with children who have learning disabilities for the last 13 years. It was very disturbing to see a reputed newspaper like yours present information regarding dyslexic children which is completely removed from reality ('Man's best friend is also doctor...'. IE, Sept 18). To group dyslexic children with children who have autism and schizophrenia is giving an already misinformed public a totally wrong picture of what dyslexia really is. While dyslexia is a normal anomaly of the brain, autism and schizophrenia are not. Dyslexics are not uncommunicative at all. In fact one of the distinguishing factors is that they are very proficient in the spoken language as compared to their reading and/or writing skills. While doing the best to encourage and work with children who have disorders that are visible, we need to come together as a responsible society and also assist the 20 per cent or so students with hidden learning disabilities to achieve their full potential.

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