

PET THERAPY FOR AT-RISK YOUNG PEOPLE

Project Evaluation Summary Report

Elisa Stannard and Megan Nutbean, Lort Smith, 2023





Lort Smith acknowledges the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which Lort Smith stands, and pays respect to Elders past and present.

Lort Smith values and celebrates diversity in our community. We are committed to providing animal care services that are inclusive and support equality and accessibility.

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INTRODUCTION

The Pet Therapy for At-Risk Youth People Project produced transformative outcomes for at-risk young people and the services that support them. The project was run by Lort Smith, a Melbourne not-for-profit animal hospital with a unique legacy of caring for pets and people and championing the human-animal bond. The project was funded by the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation - Eldon and Anne Foote Donor Advised Program, the Myer Foundation and the Carnegie Family. This report summarises the project and evaluation findings. The full project evaluation report is available upon request.

What did the project involve?

Over 13 months, Lort Smith's volunteer-dog Pet Therapy teams introduced Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) – referred to within the report as Pet Therapy (PT) – to at-risk young people aged 10-24 years experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. The project was delivered in partnership with eight specialist youth services spanning justice, secure care, alternative education, housing, mental health and rehabilitation settings. It explored the extent to which PT could support young people's emotional regulation and their engagement in activities and interventions within educational and therapeutic settings.

65 project stakeholders – 23 young people, 26 youth service staff and 16 volunteers - contributed to the project's evaluation, which was facilitated by Lort Smith with support from evaluation consultancy Lirata.

Why deliver Pet Therapy to At-Risk Young People?

Lort Smith delivers PT as a key facet of its commitment to championing the human-animal bond. Established over 35 years ago, the program involves trained volunteers and their specially assessed dogs visiting people experiencing illness, adversity, loneliness and the long-term impacts of trauma in a range of health, residential, and therapeutic facilities across Melbourne.

In 2019 Lort Smith partnered with the Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS) and Parkville College to deliver a pilot PT program to young people in custody at Parkville Youth Justice Precinct (PYJP). The aim was to explore the therapeutic benefits of Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI). Evaluation of the pilot showed that PT could be an effective tool to quickly achieve emotional regulation, helping young people to transition from a very heightened, aggravated state, or a very low, shut-down one, to a calm and regulated state in a matter of seconds. PT was also found to support young people's wellbeing. The clear, positive benefits for young people led to an ongoing partnership with DJCS to deliver a PT program at PYJP.

“ I continue to be blown away by the human - dog communications and how [my dog] seems to just know what's needed and can offer something the rest of us can't.”

PT volunteer

The PYJP pilot findings were significant as young people involved in the youth justice system tend to face ongoing challenges in achieving states of emotional regulation.

Young people who come into contact with the justice system are among the most disadvantaged and marginalised in Victoria, with many experiencing complex and intersecting issues that can accumulate and compound over time. These issues include factors such as socioeconomic disadvantage, early experiences of trauma, a history of contact with child protection and out-of-home care, disrupted education, unsafe or unstable housing and home environments, disengagement from the community, education and/or employment, alcohol and drug dependency, poor health and mental health, or previous history of contact with the justice system.

The intersection and accumulation of these challenges can have profound long-term effects on a young person's life and generate a risk of disengagement from school or community and/or of engaging in high-risk or criminal behaviour.

LORT SMITH'S RESPONSE

Youth service partnerships

The PYJP pilot's positive outcomes encouraged Lort Smith to consider other opportunities to apply PT in youth settings. The clear benefits to young people within a youth justice setting suggested that there was opportunity to use PT to support young people with similarly complex needs, before they came into contact with the justice system.

Lort Smith set out to explore how we might tailor our existing PT program for use in specialist youth service settings where at-risk young people face complex barriers to engagement. We secured funding and established partnerships with eight organisations delivering youth services, and collaborated to develop a program model and evaluation plan. We sought to build on the pilot's finding that PT supported young people's emotional regulation and wellbeing, existing evidence around the benefits of close contact with animals on people's well-being, and an understanding that engagement in education and therapeutic supports are key protective factors for young people.

The project aimed to introduce PT in a range of settings, and to document the impacts - with a particular focus on how services could use the presence of a PT team to support young people's participation in activities and interventions.

The youth services that were selected to participate in the project deliver targeted and holistic interventions, centring practice and intervention around relationship and trust building, however many at-risk young people face chronic instability and the impacts of complex trauma create significant barriers for them to trust and remain engaged with services. Young people often present in states of heightened stress and emotional dysregulation, making meaningful and sustained engagement, and the ability of services to provide effective support for young people particularly challenging.

It was proposed that if PT could support emotional regulation, it might also work to improve engagement.

Young people placed in or accessing the services that took part in the project fell into at least one of the following categories:

- In contact or at-risk of contact with the justice system
- In supported, secure accommodation during a period of significant crisis
- Experiencing or at risk of homelessness
- Accessing a residential rehabilitation program to support recovery from drug and/or alcohol issues
- Accessing a residential rehabilitation program to support recovery from mental illness
- Engaged in alternative education due to barriers participating in, or exclusion from, mainstream schooling.



LORT SMITH'S PROJECT COORDINATOR MEETING WITH A PT TEAM AT A YOUTH SERVICE

Supporting emotional regulation

The project sought to develop further evidence that PT, as explained in the infographic at right, is able to help young people achieve emotionally regulated states.

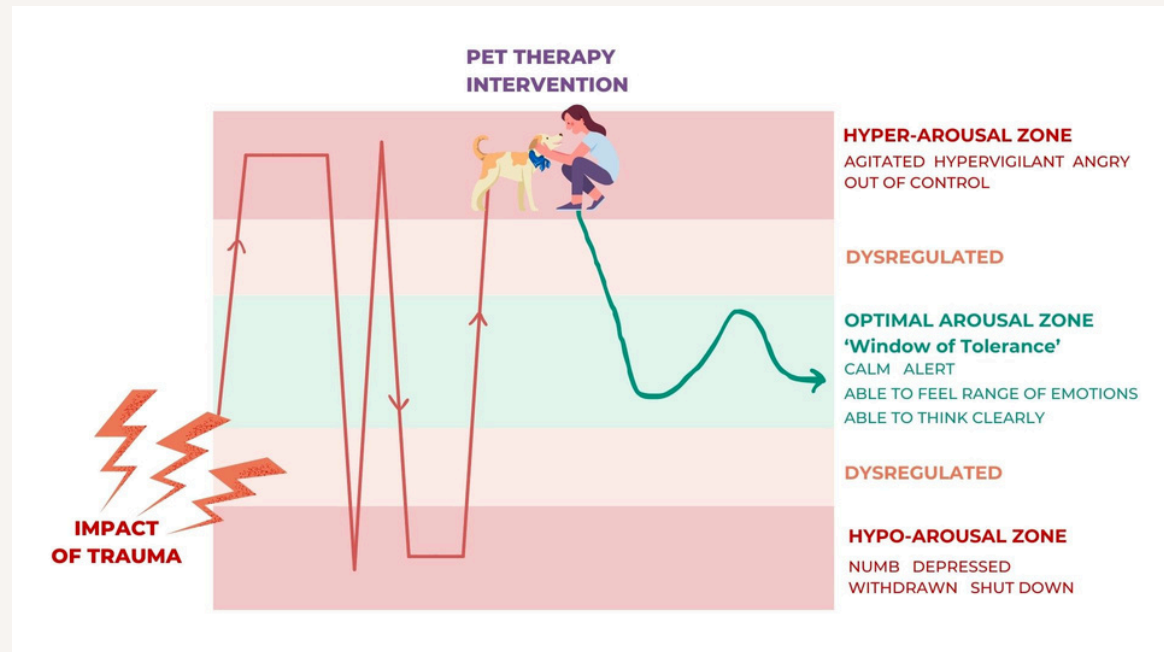
For young people to experience the benefits of therapeutic interventions, and indeed to learn in an educational context, they first need to be in a mental state that enables them to be present and engage. The 'Window of Tolerance' is a term used to describe this mental state [1]. Coined by Dr Dan Siegel - clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine, the concept refers to the optimal zone of emotional arousal for a person to function in everyday life.

When operating within this zone, an individual can effectively cope with stress and emotions without becoming overwhelmed, dysregulated or disassociated. When pushed out of this zone the 'thinking' brain stops functioning and the limbic system takes over, leading to autonomic flight/fright/freeze responses.

Young people who have experienced repeated trauma and broken attachment in crucial years of brain development face persistent challenges regulating their emotions. They tend to spend much more time in the hyper or hypo aroused zones – and find it more difficult to re-enter a regulated state.

[1] - Siegel, Daniel J. 2012. The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are. Second ed. New York: The Guilford Press.

The Window of Tolerance, trauma and Pet Therapy



The window

The area between the dotted lines represents the Window of Tolerance – the normal range of arousal for human emotions. The ebb and flow of emotions in an optimally regulated nervous system is represented by the green line.

The impact of trauma

Experiencing adversity through trauma and unmet attachment needs can drastically disrupt our nervous system.

People who have experienced such trauma enter dysregulated states more readily and more often, and find it harder to re-enter their window of tolerance, tending to 'getting stuck' in hyper- and hypo-aroused states, as represented by the orange line.

Pet Therapy

Connecting with a PT dog can have a profound effect on a young person in a hyper- or hypo-aroused state, enabling them to re-enter their window of tolerance very quickly.

The PT program model

Lort Smith's PT program is underpinned by well-established models that ensure the ethical, safe, and effective implementation of interventions involving animals. It covers aspects such as appropriate selection and training of animals, the qualifications and training of human facilitators, well-being and safety of participants, and the establishment of clear goals and evaluation methods.

Using volunteers in PT program delivery

Volunteering has been a crucial element of Lort Smith's approach to serving the community since the organisation was founded by volunteers in 1936. The PT program was established and run by volunteers for over 25 years – situating volunteers and their own dogs at the heart of the program model.

The 350 volunteers currently working at Lort Smith are an integral part of the organisation's operations, and in the PT program they generously donate their time and share the loving bond with their dogs to bring comfort and connection to those they visit.

Who were the PT volunteer teams?

25 PT teams were recruited for the project. Each team - made up of a trained volunteer and their assessed and approved dog - was matched to a service through Lort Smith's intensive assessment process. They completed specialised training in trauma-responsive practice, and completed tailored facility assessment and trial visits alongside Lort Smith staff and dog assessors.

The 25 dogs that delivered PT in this project were carefully selected with a focus on calm temperament. They came in all ages, shapes and sizes - and included a tiny Pug, Pyrenean Mountain dogs, Cavoodles, an Australian bulldog, a black Golden Retriever, Staffordshire terriers and a Husky x Labrador.

How was the project evaluated?

Lort Smith and Lirata worked with youth service partners to develop an evaluation framework and to conduct a comprehensive evaluation. Quantitative and qualitative information was gathered through a variety of methods. Post-visit reports were recorded by volunteers after every visit, and program plans, adaptations and outcomes were recorded by Lort Smith and youth service staff across the project period. The perspectives of young people were gathered through a short set of

questions that were asked in different formats by partners, with 23 responses received. Youth service staff and volunteer perspectives were captured through separate online surveys, with 26 youth service staff and 16 volunteers completing responses. At the end of the project, a stakeholder reflection session was held with youth service project partners. Thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data, and synthesised with the quantitative data to identify key learnings.



ONE OF THE LORT SMITH PT VOLUNTEER TEAMS

What did we hope to find?

The project design assumed that interacting with a PT dog would help young participants to enter their Window of Tolerance, creating a state of emotional regulation that enabled them to be present and to engage with the people and activities going on around them. This regulated state was considered by Lort Smith and project partners as a crucial first step which could then enable achievement of a range of personal, relational and functional outcomes.

Proposed outcomes

We anticipated that interaction with PT dogs during visits would facilitate the following broad outcomes:

- **Foundational** - Decrease young people's experience of stress and enable emotional regulation
- **Personal** - Increase empathy, feelings of safety, positive mood and affect, improved self-regulation and self-awareness
- **Social** - Increase young people's ability to connect and engage
- **Functional** - Support young people's engagement in service settings

Strengthened protective factors

Lort Smith identified that the anticipated outcomes aligned with known protective factors for at-risk young people, and proposed that these could also be strengthened. These included:

- Prosocial orientation and behaviours such as empathy and compassion
- Self-regulation skills
- Communication and social skills
- Involvement in school and other meaningful activities such as volunteering
- Availability of and positive relationships with caring supportive adults in the community.

Each of the 8 services identified specific aspirations in response to the unique needs of their young cohorts and their existing program practice to guide early visits (these are detailed in the tables on pages 11-13). Services were responsible for targeting, monitoring and adjusting PT practice to achieve these goals.

Lort Smith's evaluation of the project aimed to document how Pet Therapy was delivered and adapted within each of the youth service settings, and the extent to which the expected outcomes and other positive impacts were achieved.

What are protective factors for at-risk young people?

There is extensive research highlighting a range of risk and protective factors that can play a key role in determining long-term outcomes for young people experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability.

Protective factors are the characteristics of the young person and their environment that reduce the likelihood of adversity leading to negative outcomes and behaviours, such as delinquency and later adult offending behaviour[2]. Successful diversion programs tend to focus on maximising these protective factors.

[2] - See <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/juvenile-justice/risk-and-protective-factors> or <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-05/what-works-with-young-offenders-youth-on-track-guidelines.pdf>.

What did we deliver?



The majority of services reported using PT within or in support of therapeutic or targeted activities, however the extent and level of integration varied. This was due to the variable nature of service practices, resourcing, staff capacity and turnover. At a majority of services, integrated practice was still taking shape at the end of the project period - indicating the importance of continuing to invest in this work to further develop, improve and apply learnings in this burgeoning space.

Service staff feedback identified that the ability to be flexible, adaptive and responsive in how they tailored and used PT was critical to the success of its integration across their settings.

Service staff also highlighted the value of coordinated and collaborative approaches to program delivery - confirming the importance of using Lort Smith's expertise, service providers' understanding of young people's needs, and volunteer skill and feedback to plan and deliver PT in complex youth service settings. Lort Smith notes that services that had time and capacity to undertake joint planning, monitoring and review with Lort Smith had greater success integrating PT.

The focused objectives, method and level of success in integrating program activities, and the number of visits and interactions delivered across the 8 youth services, varied widely and have been summarised in the tables on pages 11-13.

Applying PT in therapeutic programming

The 8 youth services and the scope of their therapeutic work are detailed on pages 11-13.

- At the Youth Justice Precinct, Apollo Residential Rehab, Birribi Residential Rehab, Education First Youth Foyer and Fusion Housing, PT was delivered as a unique activity providing a dedicated time and space for young people to connect with PT teams.
- At Gateway School, The Pavilion School and Parkville College - Secure Care, PT teams were invited to be present and participate in the services' existing, structured activities – such as classrooms, educational activities, residential programs, and group circles.
- At The Pavilion School, Parkville College - Secure Care, Education First Youth Foyer and the Youth Justice Precinct, individualised 1:1 supports were provided in response to staff and volunteers identifying young people's unique needs.

PT used within youth service therapeutic interventions - total **61%**

Therapeutic PT use - weekly **46%**

Therapeutic PT use - fortnightly **15%**

KEY LEARNINGS

- ▶ **Settings where youth service staff were able to dedicate sufficient time to PT integration and work closely with Lort Smith and to support volunteers experienced strongest outcomes.**
- ▶ **A high level of coordination and resourcing was required from Lort Smith to support PT program adaptation, risk management and safety.**

What did PT delivery to young people in youth service settings involve?

Each of the project's eight youth service partners are introduced below. The anticipated objectives for PT delivery proposed by each service, along with program process, what was delivered, and the success of PT integration are summarised.

YOUTH SERVICE PARTNERS	SERVICE OBJECTIVES FOR PT VISITS	METHOD & SUCCESS OF PT INTEGRATION	NO. TOTAL VISITS	TYPICAL VISIT LENGTH	TOTAL PT VISIT HRS	NO. PT INTERACTIONS	NO. VISITING PT TEAMS
<p>Parkville College – Secure Care Services (Dept. Education & Dept. Families Fairness & Housing)</p> <p>A flexible learning school that operates within a secure welfare service providing short-term secure care and protection services to children and young people aged 10–17 who are at a substantial and immediate risk of harm</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen known protective factors for young people who have experienced complex trauma Support engagement in educational activities and supports 	<p>Very strong success</p> <p><i>PT project objectives achieved. Opportunities identified for further development and fine-tuning to target and increase benefits.</i></p> <p>PT was integrated into structured activities and individualised 1:1 supports – with significant success in supporting emotional regulation and wellbeing; aiding staff to build rapport and relationship, achieving repair after conflict; supporting improved interactions; and helping transition young people into educational activities. Strong, positive bonds with PT dogs identified as unique tool to support stability and transitions in and out of secure services and to support successful placement in community.</p>	49 visits	1-2 hours	54 hours	<p>108 interactions with young people</p> <p>239 staff interactions</p>	5 PT teams
<p>The Pavilion School (Dept. Education)</p> <p>Flexible learning school that offers the Victorian Pathways Certificate (VPC) and VCE-Vocational Major (VCE-VM), youth work support, electives, and extension activities education for children and young people aged 12–20 who have disengaged or been excluded from mainstream schools.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a calming influence and support wellbeing in the classroom 	<p>Very strong and mixed success</p> <p><i>PT project objectives achieved in 3 of the 6 classrooms. Opportunities identified for further development and finetuning to target supports to the differing needs of classrooms and school practices.</i></p> <p>PT integrated into structured activities and individualised 1:1 supports across 6 classrooms. Some classes experienced very significant positive individual and group benefits; others found the PT teams disruptive and discontinued program delivery. PT was effective in fostering positive group dynamics through use in class circle time; aided goal setting and task completion; supported school enrolment and refusal; improved attendance; deescalated conflict and crisis; provided support during high stress activities and challenges, and more. Volunteers increasingly provided informal 1:1 student mentoring.</p>	57 visits / 102 class sessions	1.5 -3 hours	139 hours	<p>561 interactions with young people</p> <p>364 staff interactions</p>	3 PT teams

YOUTH SERVICE PARTNERS	SERVICE OBJECTIVES FOR PT VISITS	METHOD & SUCCESS OF PT INTEGRATION	NO. TOTAL VISITS	TYPICAL VISIT LENGTH	TOTAL PT VISIT HRS	NO. PT INTERACTIONS	NO. VISITING PT TEAMS
<p>Parkville Youth Justice Precinct (Dept. Justice & Community Safety)</p> <p>A secure detention centre that accommodates children and young people aged 10–22 who are on remand or serving custodial sentences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve wellbeing and pro-social behaviour Increase protective factors associated with minimising likelihood of reoffending 	<p>Strong success</p> <p><i>PT project objectives achieved. Opportunities identified and underway to extend and enhance PT with tailored learning and work experience activities, with a focus on building skills to support transition into community post-release.</i></p> <p>PT delivered as unique activities and individualised 1:1 supports –providing targeted wellbeing supports and positive engagement opportunities for staff and young people, and engaging young people in training and development activities.</p>	<p>74 visits / 118 unit visits</p>	<p>1.5 hours</p>	<p>113 hours</p>	<p>462 interactions with young people</p> <p>388 staff interactions</p>	<p>7 PT teams</p>
<p>Education First Youth Foyer (Launch Housing)</p> <p>A supported accommodation service that supports up to 40 young people aged 16–24 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create safety and comfort Increase use of the common area Support staff and group engagement 	<p>Strong success</p> <p><i>PT project objectives achieved. Opportunities identified to develop more tailored applications of PT to support connection and capability of students.</i></p> <p>PT delivered as unique activity, integrated into structured activities and 1:1 supports: including being offered as a weekly mental health service offer; used in assertive engagement and in provision of informal mentoring for young people; and to support informal group time and planned group activities in communal area.</p>	<p>34 visits</p>	<p>2 hours</p>	<p>60.5 hours</p>	<p>202 interactions with young people</p> <p>62 staff interactions</p>	<p>3 PT teams</p>
<p>Gateway School - Roxburgh College (Dept. Education)</p> <p>Flexible learning school that provides a holistic support program, the Victorian Pathways Certificate (VPC) and VCE-Vocational Major (VCE-VM), for young people aged 15–21 who have disengaged or been excluded from mainstream schools.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a calming influence and support wellbeing in the classroom. 	<p>Success</p> <p><i>PT project objectives achieved. Opportunities to tailor and integrate PT activity yet to be explored.</i></p> <p>PT delivered within classroom settings at 2 locations. Slow progress due to departure of first matched PT team, unstructured approach to visits, limitations on space due to student allergies.</p>	<p>13 visits / 23 class sessions</p>	<p>2 hours</p>	<p>22.5 hours</p>	<p>80 interactions with young people</p> <p>33 staff interactions</p>	<p>2 PT teams</p>

YOUTH SERVICE PARTNERS	SERVICE OBJECTIVES FOR PT VISITS	METHOD & LEVEL SUCCESS OF PT INTEGRATION	NO. TOTAL VISITS	TYPICAL VISIT LENGTH	TOTAL PT VISIT HRS	NO. PT INTERACTIONS	NO. VISITING PT TEAMS
Fusion A crisis refuge that provides short term accommodation, holistic case management support, basic counselling and material aid for up to 8 young people aged 15–21 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide comfort and a sense of normalcy and home • Support staff and group engagement • Support improved psychological and emotional health. 	Limited success <i>PT objectives to provide bring sense of home and comfort within the setting were achieved during some visits but not consistently.</i> PT delivered as unique activity: aligned with weekly resident house meetings. Ongoing challenges due to the low number of young people on site and lack of consistency of visiting PT teams resulting in shortened and cancelled visits and limited engagement of young people.	24 visits	2 hours	17.5 hours	54 interactions with young people 30 staff interactions	3 PT teams
Apollo (Mind Australia) A community-based, residential mental health service that supports up to 8 young people aged 16–24 up to 12 months.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide community connection and a calming influence for the group. • To support individuals to develop grounding, self-soothing strategies, and encourage communication around feelings and emotional needs. 	Limited success <i>PT project objectives to bring community connection and calming influence were achieved during visits however visits were infrequent and ceased within project period.</i> PT delivered as unique activity: inviting residents to engage with PT team in the communal lounge. Plans to have regular visits and integrate the PT team into therapeutic sessions were not achieved due to limited availability of the PT team and lack of alignment in scheduling.	4 visits	2 hours	8.5 hours	11 interactions with young people 9 staff interactions	1 PT team
Birribi (YSAS - Youth Support & Advocacy Service) A voluntary 6-month residential alcohol and other drug rehabilitation and recovery program that supports up to 15 young people aged 16–21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create safety and support engagement in peer support sessions 	Limited success <i>PT project objectives not achieved.</i> PT delivered as unique activity, and as free-play on weekend and weekday mornings. Planned opportunities to use PT team in 1:1 casework supports; peer support sessions; and within skills development activities were not achieved due to severely allergic staff member; the lack of accessible and appropriate indoor spaces; and limited staff capacity.	30 visits	1-3 hours	45.5 hours	174 interactions with young people 44 staff interactions	3 PT teams

WHAT CHANGED?

Positive impacts for young people and youth service settings

Lort Smith's evaluation found that PT brought about a range of positive benefits. PT was shown to support young people's emotional regulation; allowing them to come into their optimal zone of arousal where they could be present, connect with others and function effectively.

Young people's engagement

The majority of young people reported that PT was a positive experience for them, and all staff confirmed that overall PT visits were engaging for young people at their services.

The role that human volunteers played in facilitating young people's involvement in PT visits was crucial. The warmth and unconditional positive regard that volunteers shared with young people helped to establish comfort and safety. Volunteers carefully guided their dogs in youth settings and invested in relationships with young people - providing encouragement and support to help them to interact with and connect with the dogs.

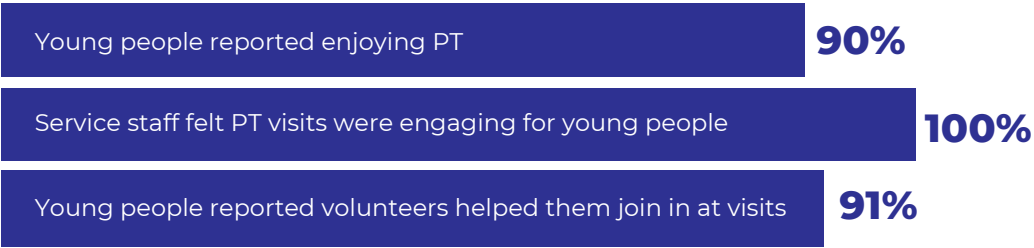
"Volunteers have been amazing at learning and caring about each of our students. They have taken the time to connect with our young people and use this to connect the student with the animal." - youth service partner

"It helps me participate when I'm calm and when there is a therapy dog there."

youth service partner



A YOUNG PERSON REACHES OUT TO SCRATCH A PT DOG'S CHIN



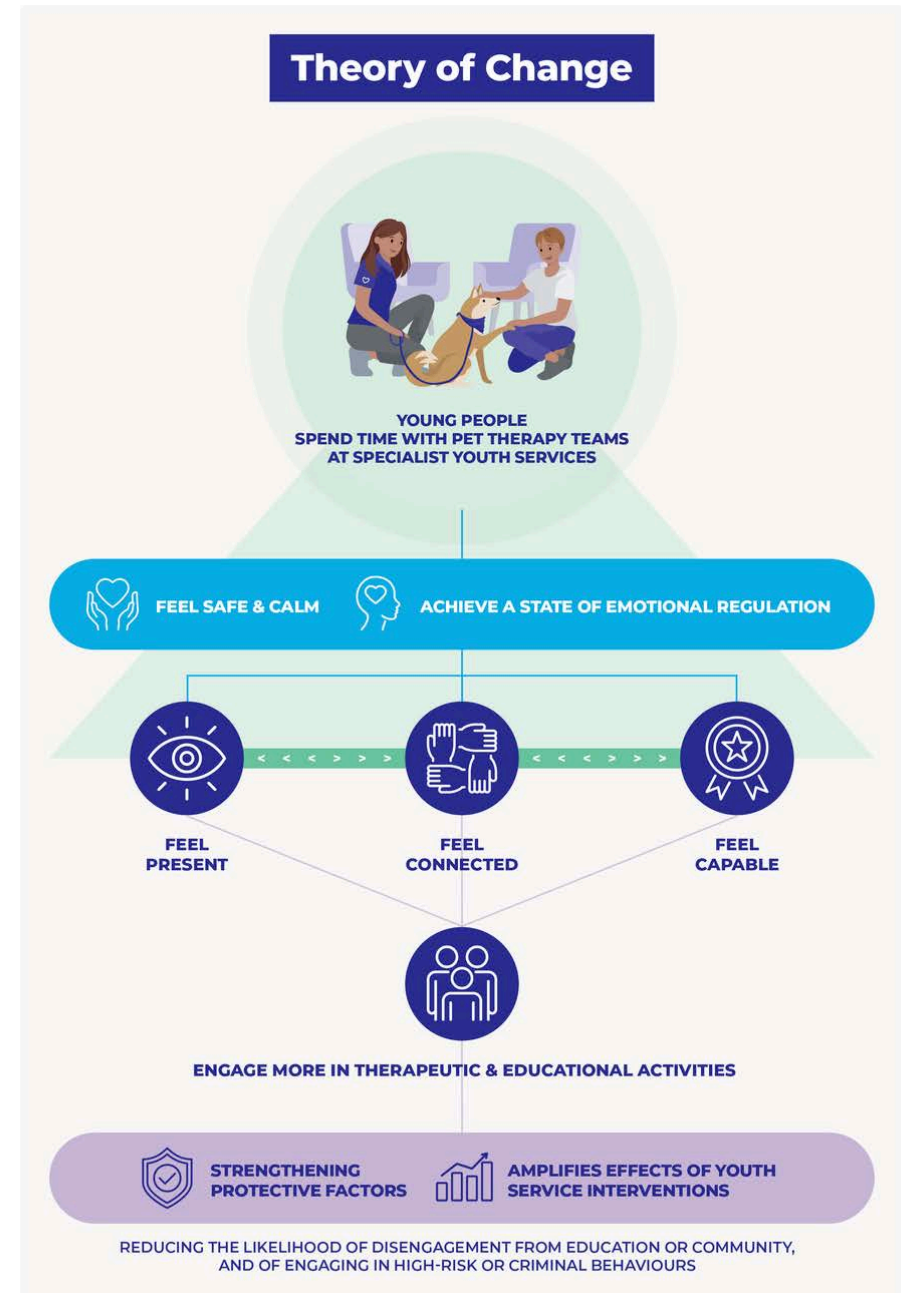
Theory of change and impact

Having well-matched PT teams in the service space generated feelings of calm and safety and supported emotional regulation for young people — many of whom experience emotional dysregulation and difficulty with trust, due to the impact of early and ongoing experiences of trauma.

Once regulated, young people were able to be present in the space, and to build trust and empathy. They experienced positive interpersonal interactions, improved communication and group dynamics, and were more motivated and willing to participate in and complete therapeutic and educational activities.

“The PT dog’s presence pulls our young people out of their own heads and insecurities and helps them to attempt tasks and conversations that they wouldn’t otherwise.”

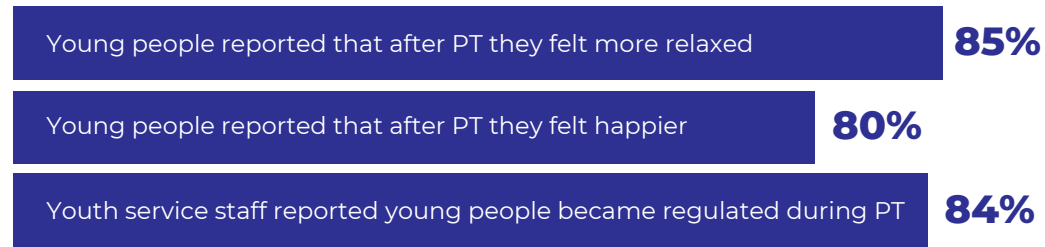
youth service partner



FOUNDATIONAL CHANGES:

YOUNG PEOPLE ACHIEVED EMOTIONAL REGULATION

As anticipated Pet Therapy was demonstrated to be a powerful tool in helping young people achieve emotionally regulated states and enter their Window of Tolerance. Young people's self-reports and staff observations confirmed that PT facilitated calm, relaxation and positive feeling states.



Young people's self assessments

Young people accessing PT overwhelmingly reported positive changes in mood and reduced stress levels - and this was interpreted as evidence of achieving emotional regulation. They reported feeling "relaxed", "quiet", "less stressed", "chill", "calm and more relaxed", and shared that visits "help me chill" and "bring a calming atmosphere" to their facilities.

"Pet Therapy makes me feel relaxed, it grounds me and makes it so the only thing I'm focusing on is the animal in front of me." - young person

Immediate benefits

Staff and volunteers noted many examples of young people's emotional regulation happening very quickly.

"Definite change in mood for [young person] who has remained in his room since arriving 4 weeks ago. 30min one on one with [the PT dog] [and the young person].. became less withdrawn and more confident." - youth service partner

"The PT dog approached the young person who was emotionally dysregulated and immediately helped resolve the crisis."

youth service partner

Impacts for young people in especially dysregulated states

The ability of PT dogs to help young people feel regulated and cope with stress was found to be particularly pronounced in time of heightened stress – such as lockdowns and critical incidents, and for young people who presented in particularly shut-down, heightened or hyper-vigilant states.

"One recent admission was a very high energy young person and the PT visit was extremely levelling for them. This young person had been sleeping rough before coming in and in a hypervigilant state, by necessity. They got to have the experience of being able to let go and just be a kid for a while." - youth service partner

KEY LEARNINGS

- ▶ **The matching of PT teams to youth settings is complex and requires significant planning, coordination, monitoring and review to ensure best fit.**
- ▶ **Informed consent of young people was a crucial and critical factor.**
- ▶ **Consistency of PT teams and their visits was key to building trust, safety, relationship and supporting emotional regulation.**
- ▶ **Lack of appropriate space for PT, poorly matched PT teams, and fear or allergy of dogs were barriers to PT supporting young people's emotional regulation.**

PERSONAL CHANGES: YOUNG PEOPLE FELT SAFE & PRESENT

PT visits fostered a sense of safety and comfort for young people. This safety and security enabled them to be present, creating a state in which they were more aware of their feelings.

These shifts in young peoples' internal worlds and their capacity to feel safe, let their guard down and truly 'be' in a space when PT dogs were present, enabled them to open up and share – inviting others to better understand them, their strengths and their needs.

Young people reported PT helped them feel safe & comfortable to share how they felt

82%

PT reported PT helped them feel more aware of their own feelings

72%

Staff observed PT supporting young people's self regulation

88%

Feeling safe

Positive connection with PT dogs, and the love and unconditional affection they provided, created safety for young people. Participants shared,

"it's a safe space", "they make me feel good. They make me feel safe and I forget that I am at [this service]."

One staff member commented,

"the therapy dogs give the young people affection and love, but also allow them to open up and share their positive experiences."

Improved mood and affect

Young people overwhelmingly experienced improved mood and affect. They spoke of feeling "happy", "calm", "joyful", and "that everything is good" when the dogs were present. Staff confirmed the significant positive impact, describing "the dog visits are like a joy bomb. They really light up and are happy for the rest of the day."

PT also enabled young people to feel beyond their current state and experience positive thoughts, feelings and memories. One young person shared, "when I'm with the Therapy dogs it makes me think of good times."

"Presence of [the PT] dog can visibly demonstrate and create a "safe space" for students."

youth service partner

Feeling self-aware and able to self-regulate

Young people reported being more aware of their feelings and were able to articulate the positive impacts PT visits had on their moods and emotional experiences.

Across all service settings, staff reported seeing immediate, positive impacts on young people's emotional regulation. Furthermore, young people were observed actively self-regulating to create safety and stability for PT dogs.

"Students are concerned for dog's safety. Some of the sessions can be quite intense, and concern for [the PT dog] can help calm things down ('You might scare [the PT dog]')".

- youth service partner

KEY LEARNINGS

- ▶ **The benefits of increased safety and openness could be further explored in 1:1 and group/circle practice and activities.**
- ▶ **The authenticity of volunteers, and their willingness to be open and share with young people were critical factors in creating safety and building trust.**
- ▶ **PT aligns clearly with social and emotional skills/learning.**
- ▶ **PT was particularly effective in creating safety in high stress scenarios, and shows great potential in supporting approaches to new clients, admissions, enrolments, outreach and transition between services.**

SPOTLIGHT ON IMPACT - JOEL*

Feeling EMOTIONALLY REGULATED, SAFE and PRESENT

As a young person who had been removed from his family at an early age and had spent the majority of his childhood in the out-of-home care system, Joel had experienced enormous compounded complex trauma and significant instability in out-of-home-care placements in his short life. When he first came to Secure Care's attention, he'd had been enrolled in more than 10 schools and had moved over 50 times. A lack of consistency and continuity of carers, educators, and support workers had been a huge barrier for Joel.

In the community he had been reported missing from child protection placement on numerous occasions and he had experienced increasing involvement with the youth justice system. The Parkville College teaching staff at Secure Care noted that he had had 15 admissions to Secure Care Services and 8 youth detention admissions over the preceding 3 years, and many more before this.

When assessments found him to be at extremely high risk of harm in the community Joel entered the Secure Care Service for short stays on protective orders - designed to stabilise and keep him safe. During his stays Joel had generally been enthusiastic about attending educational activities and had been working with the teaching team to build his stamina, but found concentrating and sitting still for classes a challenge. He had generally struggled to articulate or elaborate his feelings.

Joel received a short visit from a PT team during one of his stays, and spent time with a sweet, bouncy miniature poodle. She instantly captured Joel's attention and her effect on him was immediate and significant. Their connection enabled him to be truly present.

For the duration of the visit Joel was calm. He sat quietly on the floor with the little dog and remained focused on her for 25 minutes while he taught her tricks. When asked how having a dog in the room made him feel he shared:

"Calm, Chillaxed, you know? Like not heightened or angry or anything".

"In all my many interactions with Joel I have never seen him more relaxed, in control, proud and reflective."

youth service partner

Joel's teacher was overwhelmed by the immediate and positive impact the interaction had on Joel's mood, comfortability and self-awareness.

"This visit ultimately connected Joel to his child protection worker who was visiting at the time."

During the afternoon community meeting Joel checked in as happy, stating he was angry at the start of the day. When asked the causes of this change, he said "the dog and music".

He also invited others into the space, including [his child protection worker], and ensured all members in the meeting had a chance to express their feelings.

In all my many interactions with Joel I have never seen him more relaxed, in control, proud and reflective."

"In short, Joel is exactly the student who benefits from this program. The impact on him was so profound. After the visit I can say for certain that Joel needs and deserves increased access to Pet Therapy."

youth service partner

*The young person's name has been changed to protect their privacy.

SOCIAL CHANGES: YOUNG PEOPLE FELT CONNECTED

The presence of PT dogs significantly improved the way young people expressed themselves, interacted with others, and engaged in therapeutic and educational activities. Feedback from young people staff and volunteers indicated that PT led to improved empathy and compassion; communication; social interactions; and group dynamics.

The rapport, connection and care young people experienced with PT dogs, and then with volunteers, appeared to be a crucial element in facilitating pro-social engagement. In their interactions with dogs young people could share their positive selves and be seen in their best light - facilitating positive interactions and engagement with other young people and staff in services where relationships are crucial.

Co-regulation

PT often created a sense of collective calm.

A calm dog's presence provided opportunity for 1:1 co-regulation, and helped to settle and stabilise group energies. Young people sought out these benefits, which were at times profound.

"A young man who felt too embarrassed to go on stage to receive an award at graduation only came on stage when he came up with [the PT dog]. He then proudly posed for a photo with [the PT dog] and his award." - youth service partner

Bonding, interaction and group dynamic

Young people talked a lot about how the presence of a Pet Therapy dog acted as a unifying factor, bringing people together and creating a sense of connection within a group or space.

"When the dog runs around circle at start of the session, it brings people together and connects them. It changes the dynamic. Having the dog in the space creates cohesion."

youth service partner

Improved communication

PT dogs were a catalyst for positive communication, facilitating personal sharing, providing a common topic of discussion, and giving everyone in the room something to talk about.

"[PT] helps me communicate with others."
- young person



A GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE GATHER AROUND A PT DOG

Empathy, compassion and care

PT increased feelings of empathy and compassion in young people.

"[The PT volunteer] does well to explain to students why [the PT dog] may be behaving in a particular way, whether this be due to something overwhelming that has happened that day, or just a facet of his personality. This helps our students to develop empathy." - youth service partner

Staff reflected that PT dogs brought out the soft, caring side of young people who might otherwise present with guards up. Volunteers regularly observed young people expressing kindness and care to the dogs and reflected that these expressions often acted as catalysts for connection.

"There was a lovely moment today when [the young person] noticed [the PT dog's] tail was very close to the wheels of a chair that [a young person] was sitting on, she came over to warn us and carefully moved his tail out of the way. It was a lovely interaction between students to actively look out for the dog and it segued into a lovely conversation and photo sharing of pets at home." - youth service partner

Powerful human-animal connection

Young people expressed that they'd developed strong connections with the PT dogs, enjoying their attention, affection and presence and companionship.

PT dogs enabled "a physical, loving connection with another living thing". This tactile connection and comfort, and the ability to pet and hug the dogs, was especially significant for young people in settings where opportunity to experience loving touch was minimal or prohibited.

Relationships with therapy dogs were especially meaningful for young people experiencing instability.

Young people reported feeling accepted, loved and cared for

77%

Young people reported feeling more able to understand others' feelings

65%

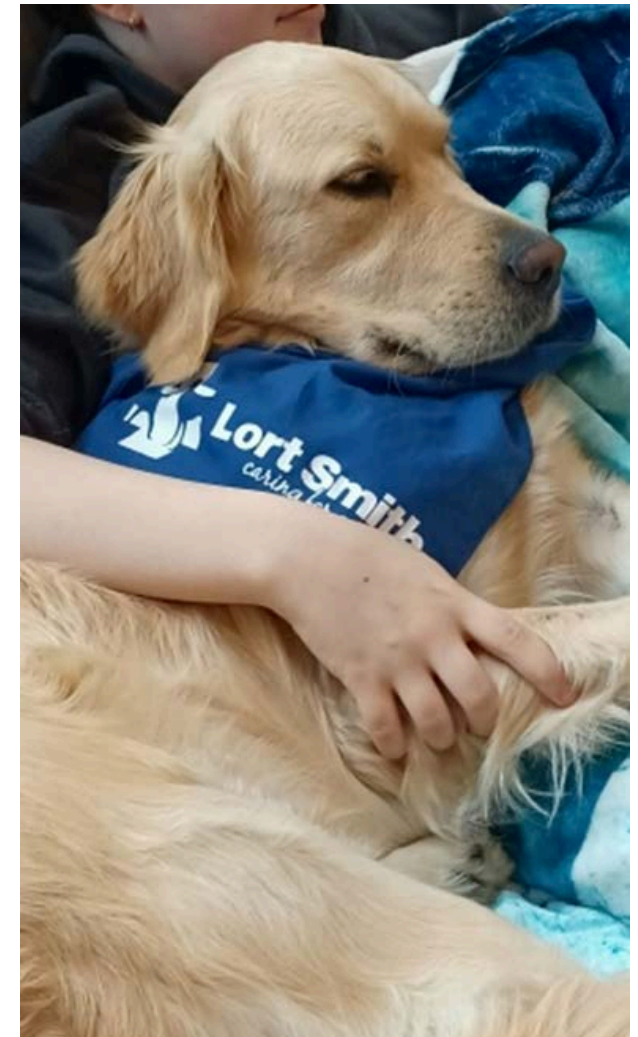
Young people reported feeling caring towards others when they were upset

78%

At a secure service staff noted that the positive connection young people had with the dogs was at times so strong that they had asked to remain on site beyond the conditions of their protective order.

"We have students holding off exit times to see the dogs. Shows how much they value the time with the dog. For example, they might be scheduled to exit in the morning, but ask to be picked up after the PT session."

— youth service partner —



A YOUNG PERSON SNUGGLES UP WITH A PT DOG

Positive relationship modeling

The relationship between dog and handler in each PT team provided a model of healthy attachment, connection, trust and care to young people. The dynamic between dog and handler introduced a uniquely positive social interaction and set the tone for PT visits - inviting young people to interact in this way, too.

The voluntary nature of the PT role also provided a unique experience for young people - and staff noted how significant it was for them to experience connection and care from a positive adult figure there without any agenda.

“Many young people have extensive care teams, lives filled with adults and professionals. Often hear ‘You’re only here because your being paid’, knowing it’s a volunteer choosing to come spend time with them is very impactful.” - youth service provider

Witnessing young people in their best light

Staff identified that in dynamics involving the group, witnessing positive interactions between individual young people and the PT dogs enabled everyone to see that individual in a positive light, facilitating improved connection and engagement.

“The dog brings out the best in young people and this allows others to see and respond to this version of them”. - youth service provider

In educational settings, this opportunity was particularly effective in circle time or during group situations where young people were using the same space in a shared activity, and visible to one another. A teacher explained:

“In circle time, when dogs are going around to certain people, the dogs tend to sit next to certain students. Demeanour of students change. Other students see the student acting warmly and affectionately toward the animal. They might not see this behaviour otherwise and gives them insight into how this student can be.”

Incentive for attendance

Once relationships developed between young people and dogs, the connection created positive incentives for attendance. There were clear instances in education settings of particularly disengaged young people and those refusing school only attending on the day of the week that ‘their’ PT dog would be present.

Facilitating therapeutic relationships

Service staff reported that the dogs had the power to foster and strengthen relationships between young people and service staff and workers, and to support fast resolution after relationship breakdown. They shared:

“Dogs have been good with opportunities to repair. Students first interacting with dog, and drop guard enough for staff to reach them.”

“We use visits strategically to time awkward phone-calls to lawyers, parents, other workers... after the visit has calmed them down.”

KEY LEARNINGS

- ▶ **Increases in self-awareness and pro-social skills present opportunity to align PT with social and emotional learning objectives and activities.**
- ▶ **PT enabled co-regulation and could be used in targeted ways to respond to, or prevent, heightened states during times of increased stress.**
- ▶ **The development of relationships over time created a sense of shared care, responsibility, pride and advocacy for the dogs - strengthening empathy and compassion. There is opportunity to consolidate and extend these benefits.**
- ▶ **PT supported attendance and response to school refusal where strong bonds and relationships developed between young people and dogs.**
- ▶ **PT supported positive connection, engagement, and repair with youth service staff, and may be further targeted to foster and strengthen service relationships.**

SPOTLIGHT ON IMPACT - SAM*

PT supports young people to be CONNECTED

When Sam started attending The Pavilion School they entered a classroom that had a strong relationship with one of Lort Smith's Pet Therapy (PT) teams, who visited weekly. The Pet Therapy (PT) dog and volunteer had established a strong rapport with the classroom's students and become a positive feature in the learning space. Sam was one of the youngest students in the class, very shy, and selectively mute. Sam found themselves at The Pavilion School after experiences in other educational settings failed to provide the support they needed to engage and thrive. They had remained silent throughout their school intake interview and early days at the school.

Once a week the PT team would spend time in the classroom and connect with Sam and the other students. The PT volunteer noticed that from the first day they met – Sam and the PT dog had a special connection. Each week they would seek each other out to enjoy quiet time in one another's presence. Initially Sam's interactions with the PT dog were silent and took place in quieter areas of the classroom, and staff noticed a tangible, positive connection between them. Sam continued to seek out opportunities to sit with the PT team, and began to engage in conversations with the volunteer as they worked together during class activities. Sam often shared that spending time with the PT team was the highlight of their week.

A few weeks into Sam's attendance, students began a project that involved planning, writing and interviewing someone for a recorded podcast. Despite their limited comfortability with communication, Sam decided to interview the PT volunteer. The connection they'd established enabled Sam to spend time with the dog and volunteer, discussing and developing their ideas and a structure for the project. Sam was focused and diligent with their preparation and developed questions that were interesting and engaging. Despite being the youngest and quietest student in the class, Sam not only completed the project but recorded one of the first and longest interviews, which their teacher shared "was one of the student's first significant 'wins' at school".

"Having the quiet, consistent and unconditional company and comfort of the PT team allowed them time and space to feel safe as they discerned a new environment and found their voice."

youth service partner

The PT volunteer reflected, that "doing the recorded interview was a wonderful achievement for them, I was so impressed by their questions and prep.. so proud of them, they were so quiet when we first started and have come such a long way with their confidence and communication."

Sam's teacher noted that the uniquely supportive connection and relationship Sam developed with the dog and volunteer had a huge and ongoing positive impact on them. "Having the quiet, consistent and unconditional company and comfort of the PT team allowed them time and space to feel safe as they discerned a new environment and found their voice."

Sam's positive experience of connecting with the PT team and completing the project also became a source of positive connection with staff and family. "Reflecting on the success, sharing it with other staff and with their family at home had a significant impact on Sam's confidence in learning tasks. Since, they have continued to seek out opportunities to share and celebrate their completed learning tasks with others across the school as well as at home."

Sam's teacher reflected that the student's relationship with the PT team had been a significant catalyst for their personal and academic growth.

"This student has completely transformed in their time at The Pavilion. They have formed connections and friendships across all parts of the school, engage in all the electives and programs on offer and regularly share their successes with staff across the school. While it is impossible to pinpoint one thing that has led to this transformation, this first success, in interviewing the PT team, was the first turning point."

*The young person's name has been changed to protect their privacy.

FUNCTIONAL CHANGES:

YOUNG PEOPLE FELT CAPABLE

The presence and benefits of PT dogs in youth service settings improved young people's capability to participate in therapeutic and educational activities, incentivised attendance, and facilitated engagement.

Increased attendance and engagement

Young people shared that the PT dogs created a reason to attend and engage, fostering positive energy in service spaces that supported them to take part and get involved.

"Having a pet there incentivises me to participate in activities and learning opportunities as it helps me feel relaxed and comfortable." - young person

Staff from flexible learning settings detailed significant impact for young people who experienced barriers to attendance and engagement.

"[The PT team] visit our class every Thursday. Several of our students who are on modified timetables and attend sporadically, choose to attend on a Thursday so that they can see [the dog]. Thursdays are our highest attendance day, almost every week." - youth service partner

"We strategically used [the PT team] to encourage the attendance of a disengaged student who had not left her bedroom in her residential unit. This had an immediate impact - even the phone call to notify her of this plan encouraged her to get up, shower and leave her room to speak to her workers about it. This student since plans her attendance around [the PT team's] visits and has been a key part of her attendance plan with her support team." - youth service partner

Young people reported it was easier to listen and pay attention when PT dogs present **79%**

Young people reported being more likely to attend when PT dogs present **86%**

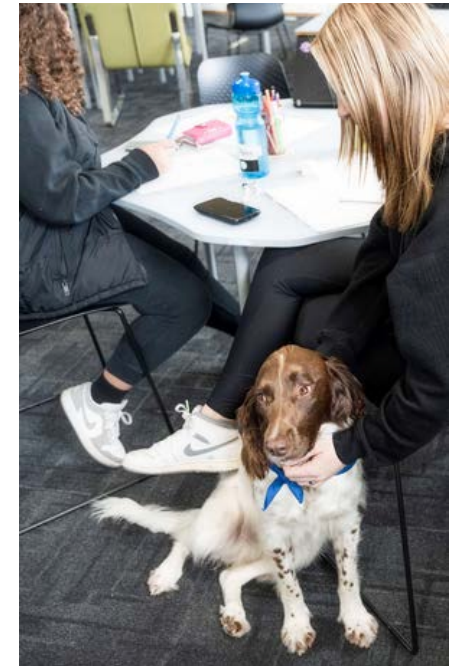
Youth service staff reported positive effect on participation and attendance **84%**

Increased motivation

PT supported wellbeing and energised young people. It provided a release and an opportunity to reset after challenges. The presence of the PT dogs helped young people feel more willing and able to have a go at new things, to start and complete tasks, and to set and achieve goals.

"Gives you more motivation for your day." - young person

After the session, I feel relaxed and refreshed, and ready to continue my work." - young person



A PT DOG SITS BESIDE YOUNG PEOPLE AS THEY WORK

"Pet Therapy itself creates activities and learning opportunities, it creates an environment in which you are left wanting to participate and ask questions."

— young person

Goal and activity completion

Youth service staff reported positive effect on completion of tasks, goals and activities

79%

PT's benefits for task and activity completion were strongest in school settings where the dogs and volunteers provided unique motivation for students who had difficulty engaging with schoolwork. Having a PT dog there helped them build relationships, attend classes, and set and work towards their goals.

"There are other young people who only work on skills like numeracy while dogs are there. In workshops people are more likely to share. The work will get done when it may not have otherwise. Resistance is different with the dog. Way more chance of buy in when the dog is there." - youth service partner

"Some students only work because the dog is there. Some connect to volunteer instead, but have similar positive effect." - youth service partner



A YOUNG PERSON CONNECTS WITH A PT DOG IN A FLEXIBLE LEARNING CLASSROOM

"It helps me participate when I'm calm and when there is a therapy dog there. It makes me feel like there is support."

— young person —

KEY LEARNINGS

- ▶ The positive impact of PT on young people's motivation offers opportunity to target PT to address known barriers to engagement.
- ▶ Given the positive effect PT had on some young people's attendance it would be useful to further explore the optimal 'dosage' of PT; and to consider what other models of Animal-Assisted Interventions might increase access and 'dosage', and how this might strengthen benefits.
- ▶ Activities that deliberately incorporated the PT dog as a subject led to particularly high engagement. Young people were often motivated to plan and complete tasks that involved the dogs themselves – this could be a focus for generating specific tools and resources.
- ▶ Consistency of visits was key to achieving many functional benefits, across all settings. In services where PT teams visited a consistent group of young people, such as classrooms and longer-stay residential facilities, consistency was even more crucial. Positive outcomes were amplified when a consistent PT team visited the same space every week, slowly building trusting relationships between the young people, dogs, volunteers and staff.

SPOTLIGHT ON IMPACT - ADAM*

PT supports young people to be CAPABLE

Adam was a young person serving a custodial sentence at a secure facility, and had participated in regular, ongoing visits with PT dogs and volunteers. PT teams visited twice-weekly as part of regular PT programming. Adam lit up whenever the dogs entered the unit. Over time his confidence interacting with both the dogs and volunteers grew. He came to know their names, demonstrated a real interest in the dogs, and developed confidence in his capacity to talk with the volunteers - asking questions about the dogs and their care. One of the volunteers reflected, “watching the warmth and genuine connection that he developed over time has been very rewarding.”

When Lort Smith introduced Youth Pathways program activities [3] - with the aim of extending the benefits of PT, building skills, and strengthening positive pathways post-release - Adam was selected to participate. Staff recognised that he was eager to develop his skills in animal care and training, and would find the experience enjoyable and rewarding.

During the session, Adam and other young people were invited to work one-on-one with a PT dog, volunteer and Lort Smith dog trainer, and to learn about dog behaviour, communication, and basic training. The Lort Smith team modelled training practices and supported the young people to learn through doing. Adam stepped up eagerly, choosing to work with a sweet, stocky staffy. He listened attentively, followed the trainer’s instructions, and tried each technique again and again until the dog succeeded. He was receptive to feedback and quickly picked up the importance of being patient and positive in his communication. The Lort Smith team noticed his delight as he and the dog mastered each new skill together. The PT volunteer reflected, “it was brilliant to see the satisfaction on his face!”

Towards the end of the session Adam noticed that the dog was showing signs that she needed a break, and suggested that he take her away from the group to give her a rest. He carefully led her off away from the group for some quiet time. After a break and some free play Adam and the trainer decided they’d practice the sit instruction with her.

Another young person named Daniel*, approached. Daniel had expressed a lack of interest at the start of the session and decided to hang back and just

“I’m good at working with dogs”.

young person

watch during the training exercises. He looked on as Adam gave the PT dog food rewards, indicating that he wanted to try but felt unsure about touching the dog. Without any prompting from the Lort Smith team Adam took the lead, stepping up to support and encourage Daniel to have a go. “Here, I’ll show you”, he offered, before demonstrating how to hold the treat, ask the dog to sit, and give the treat as reward. Daniel expressed concern that he couldn’t do it. Adam showed him again how to calmly give her the instruction and gently hold out the treat. He told Daniel, “don’t be afraid, she won’t hurt you, have a try, you can do it.”

With Adam’s support, Daniel stepped in and tried, but found it difficult. Each time he tried he lost confidence, pulling away and dropping the treat before the dog could take it. The dog sat patiently. Adam was patient, too. “You can do it”, he reassured. After 4 or 5 attempts, Daniel managed to leave his hand out for the dog to take the treat from his fingers. Adam beamed and congratulated him – the pair high-fiving at his success. Adam urged Daniel to have another go, which he did, and they took turns giving her instruction, laughing together each time he succeeded in delivering the dog her reward.

In this brief interaction – brought together by the PT dog - both Adam and Daniel found opportunity to grow, to confront a challenge, experience new abilities, and feel confidence in themselves. The session also gave Adam a unique opportunity to express his strengths: his sensitivity, care, and nurture; and natural ability to lead; and provided a dynamic in which he could positively connect and engage with community members, staff and other young people in the group. In a reflection discussion after the session Adam shared that he’d learned a lot, and that the session made him feel “proud” and “confident”. He asserted, “I’m good at working with dogs”.

*The young people's names have been changed to protect their privacy.

[3] - The Youth Pathways program was a separate trial delivered during the project period and is detailed on p.28

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Both the Pet Therapy and Youth Pathways [4] projects were found to have a direct impact on a range of important Protective Factors for at-risk young people including:

- Improving self-regulation skills.
- Improving feelings of self-worth.
- Improving prosocial orientation and behaviours such as empathy and compassion.
- Enabling connection with other people who model pro-social behaviour.
- Improving communication and social skills.
- Increasing involvement in school and other meaningful activities such as volunteering.
- Facilitating positive relationships with caring supportive adults in the community.
- Strengthening community service opportunities and volunteerism.
- Improving sense of purpose and positive future.

There is great power and potential for Pet Therapy and Youth Pathways programs to positively impact the protective factors associated with diverting young people away from the justice system, and helping them to find purpose, meaning and success in their lives.

[4] - The Youth Pathways program was a separate trial delivered during the project period and is detailed on p.28



A YOUNG PERSON ENGAGES WITH A PT DOG AND VOLUNTEER, SHARING CARE AND AFFECTION

BENEFITS FOR STAFF AND THEIR WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Improved relationships

Youth service staff reported that PT supported them to connect, establish and strengthen connections; and ultimately develop more effective working relationships with young people. This result is particularly significant given how crucial trust and relationship are to effective practice in all of the project's youth service settings.

Furthermore, a number of staff reflected that the opportunity to see young people - who often presented with complex, challenging behaviours, and in great distress or states of dysregulation - in calm, regulated and child-like states was incredibly valuable. It allowed staff to see them in their best light, providing insight to their vulnerability, their strengths and their potential.

"We forget at times that they are just a kid. It's really meaningful to see them behave that way, when you see them free and playing and being silly and happy. You don't see that with these young people often. They've all had to grow up so fast."- youth service partner



A STAFF MEMBER INTERACTS WITH A PT DOG

Improved engagement

Improved relationships provided increased opportunity to engage young people and to tailor and deliver responsive services and interventions. This benefit offers services opportunity to enhance and amplify their investment of time, resources and expertise.

Improved wellbeing

The positive impact that PT had on staff themselves - on their stress levels, energy, and wellbeing - should not be discounted. PT provided comfort, joy, and wellbeing support to staff in service settings where they are exposed to high levels of stress and vicarious trauma.

"Able to build better rapport and relationships with students through the use of the Pet Therapy thus leading to more engagement in education for them. "

— youth service partner —

Youth service staff reported positive effect on their ability to build rapport with young people **73%**

Youth service staff reported positive effect on their ability to work with young people **88%**

Youth service staff reported PT had positive impact on their stress levels **81%**

"I had a student who would not engage with me at all. Didn't talk to me much or want to come to classes. I found I didn't know much about her at all and was struggling to engage her.

During a PT visit this particular student got a one on one with the dog and I was able to be present for that visit. Because of the instant connection with the therapy dog the student opened up with loads of information about herself, her life and experiences, hopes and goals for the future etc.

This experience was key to my being able to begin a relationship with that student. From then on she would chat with me and come to my classes or outreach. "

— youth service partner —

ANIMAL CARE YOUTH PATHWAYS TRIAL

Lort Smith engaged 70 young people from the PT youth services participating in the youth project to take part in a trial of additional animal-related activities.

What did Youth Pathways involve?

The trial delivered mentored learning sessions, and supported volunteering and work experience placements at Lort Smith's Adoption Centre, to increase young people's knowledge and skills in animal care and training. 11 program sessions were delivered across a 7-month period.

The program provided unique learning and work experience opportunities to young people who typically face significant barriers to training and employment. The sessions were designed to build on the positive relationships young people had developed with PT teams, and facilitate learning experiences with a focus on animals. Young people were invited to make a positive community contribution, and able to gain valuable experiences and attain important life skills.

Early Results

Young people participating in Youth Pathways activities overwhelmingly reported positive feedback about their experiences. They shared that participating in the sessions made them feel “calm”, “curious”, “sympathetic” and “optimistic”.

12 young people and 12 staff members completed formal feedback surveys, 10 young people provided verbal feedback, and 7 volunteers completed post-visit reports. Evaluation found that participation in structured learning and work experiences involving animal interaction created positive shifts in young people's regulatory states, their engagement, and their ability to articulate their experiences.

Young people reported:

- Reduced anxiety and improved emotional regulation.
- Improved self-confidence, feelings of wellbeing, and positive self-concept.
- Positive sense of connection to self and others.
- Increased motivation and awareness of their own value, potential and capability.

Staff reported that program activities: strengthened known protective factors, increased young people's skills, and inspired new aspirations for learning and life paths.

“Made my true colours come out.”

young person



LORT SMITH DELIVERING A YOUTH PATHWAYS ACTIVITY AT YOUTH JUSTICE

“I loved volunteering and supporting – it made me feel connected.”

young person

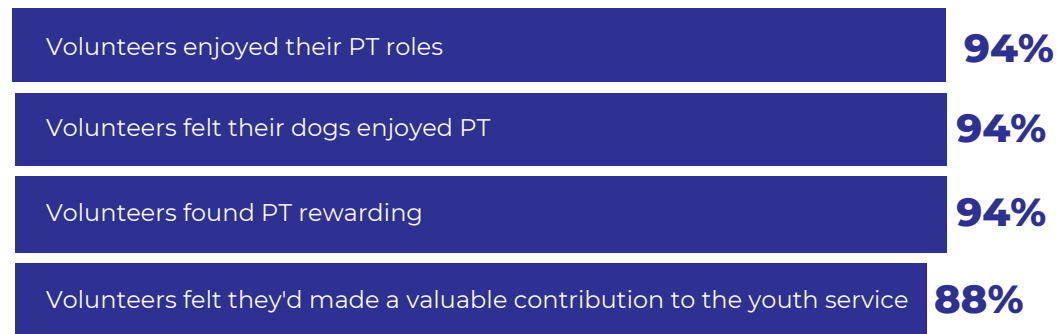
THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

An important contribution

The role of a PT volunteer with at-risk young people was both rewarding and challenging. Overwhelmingly volunteers reported enjoying visiting youth services with their dogs and spoke very positively about the value of connecting with young people and the contribution they made.

"It makes me very proud."

PT volunteer



A complex and challenging role

Throughout the project, volunteers worked in environments that were unpredictable and confronting – and in some cases became deeply invested in the young people they supported. As a consequence, they often experienced emotional distress and were at risk of witnessing or experiencing verbal (and other) aggression. They also risked becoming emotionally over-involved and experiencing vicarious trauma. While volunteers were trained to deal with a variety of scenarios they might encounter, the importance of effective communication and comprehensive volunteer supports cannot be understated.

Volunteers that reported feeling well informed about the scope, expectation and impact of their roles and visits, and who were actively supported to develop meaningful relationships with staff and young people reported strong satisfaction in their roles, confidence in their capacity to create positive impact, and motivation to continue in the program. Those volunteering in youth services where these critical supports were lacking reported feeling limited satisfaction, undervalued, underutilised, uncertain of the value of their contribution, and were less likely to continue donating their time in the program.

Supports and mentoring are vital

While using volunteers can contribute to cost-effective service delivery, recruitment, screening, supporting and supervising volunteers takes significant time, skill and resources. Having volunteers who feel confident and capable in their roles, and who feel connected and part of the service and organisation they visit, is vitally important to sustainable program delivery.

Key requirements for volunteer support and supervision include:

- Providing clear instruction around scope and purpose of visits to build volunteer confidence and capability. This includes pre and post-visit briefs to clarify objectives, provide necessary information to support engagement, and to reflect on issues and impacts.
- Involving volunteers in youth service workplaces and investing time to actively build their organisational knowledge, relationships and effective communication channels.
- Facilitating adequate access to young people to ensure that the time volunteers donate is well spent on-site.
- Providing mentoring, supervision and professional development.

KEY LEARNINGS

- ▶ **Volunteer satisfaction, and ratings of PT's impact, were lower in smaller residential and long-stay rehabilitation facilities where uptake of PT by young people was low and inconsistent.**
- ▶ **There were both benefits and risks involved when PT teams formed strong bonds with young people.**
- ▶ **It is imperative that youth service settings provide adequate information, guidance, supervision and ongoing training to volunteers to equip and support them to work with the complex needs of the young people and the settings they visit, to maintain satisfaction, and ensure volunteer team retention.**

OPPORTUNITIES TO EXTEND POSITIVE IMPACT

The Pet Therapy for At-Risk Young People project demonstrates the transformative potential of Pet Therapy and Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI) for at-risk young people. Carefully designed and integrated AAI programs, delivered by volunteers in close collaboration with Pet Therapy Providers (such as Lort Smith) and youth service partners, can deliver a range of unique benefits for young people. Pet Therapy programs create potential to dramatically amplify the impact of interventions designed to support young people, particularly in group therapeutic or educational activities.

The project demonstrates the enormous potential for further innovation and collaboration delivering PT in youth service settings. Lort Smith is eager to continue this work. Opportunities to explore, learn and extend positive impact include:

- Continuing to work with existing youth service partners to draw on the expertise of young people and service staff to co-design and develop tailored PT activities and resources to guide therapeutic work and achieve more specific and targeted outcomes.
- Designing and trialling a formal Animal Care Youth Pathways program model.
- Developing improved evaluation practices to support youth services to capture data and insights from young people and program practice.
- Working with existing and new youth service partners to determine where PT can have the most impact - identifying barriers to service engagement and further targeting program activities and interventions to young people who stand to experience the greatest benefits.
- Exploring the pro-social model that the human-dog PT team presents, and how its benefits can be used more intentionally in therapeutic practice.
- Working with youth services to scope and develop program activities and resources that align with and complement existing practice around strengthening social and emotional skills.
- Exploring the mechanics of PT practice – including the efficacy of program dosage and design across different settings.
- Developing program resources that invite active learning and engagement around animal care themes.
- Working with youth services to purposefully plan PT interventions that support connection, rapport, and repair between staff and young people.
- Exploring how PT can best support group work and interactive therapeutic activities.
- Undertaking further research into different PT models and potential impact in flexible education settings.
- Exploring opportunities for PT to be used in outreach activities - to support young people's admissions, enrolments, and transitions to other services, to strengthen family and community connection - and improve the continuity of care for at-risk young people.



A YOUNG PERSON SHARING COMFORT AND CONNECTION WITH A PT DOG

“Pet Therapy has had such a profound impact on the staff and students at our school. I love that you're looking to improve it even more.”

youth service partner



**Interested to learn more
or partner with Lort Smith?**

**Contact: Megan Nutbean –
Manager Community Programs,
Lort Smith**

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