

# Pet Therapy for At-Risk Young People



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

The **Pet Therapy for At-Risk Young People** project introduced volunteer-dog teams into a range of specialised youth services across Melbourne. Pet Therapy (PT) visits were delivered to young people experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, who were facing increased risk of disengagement from education and community, and contact with the justice system.

The project evaluated how integrating PT into youth service practices supported young people's emotional regulation and their engagement in activities and interventions.

Funded by philanthropic supporters, the project was delivered by Lort Smith — a Melbourne-based not-for-profit animal hospital with a unique legacy of championing the human-animal connection.

**Lort Smith's Pet Therapy program** involves carefully selected and trained volunteers and dogs visiting people experiencing disadvantage, ill-health, loneliness, and adversity in community settings.

## What did we deliver?

**25**                

**VOLUNTEER DOG PT TEAMS PROVIDED:**

**384** PET THERAPY VISITS  
**461** HOURS OF PT CONTACT TO AT-RISK YOUNG PEOPLE  
**8** SPECIALIST YOUTH SERVICES ACROSS MELBOURNE



**1,652**

**PT INTERACTIONS WITH AT-RISK YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 10-24**

**PROJECT RAN 59-WEEKS**  
1 MAY 2022 – 16 JUNE 2023



**65 PROJECT STAKEHOLDERS CONTRIBUTED TO THE PROJECT'S EVALUATION**

YOUNG PEOPLE	<b>23</b>
YOUTH SERVICE STAFF	<b>26</b>
PT VOLUNTEERS	<b>16</b>

## What changed?

### YOUNG PEOPLE PARTICIPATING IN PET THERAPY



**FELT SAFE & CALM**



**ACHIEVED A STATE OF EMOTIONAL REGULATION**



**FELT PRESENT**



**FELT CONNECTED**



**FELT CAPABLE**



**WERE MORE ENGAGED**



**STRENGTHENING PROTECTIVE FACTORS**



**AMPLIFYING EFFECTS OF YOUTH SERVICE INTERVENTIONS**

REDUCING THE LIKELIHOOD OF DISENGAGEMENT FROM EDUCATION OR COMMUNITY, AND OF ENGAGING IN HIGH-RISK OR CRIMINAL BEHAVIOURS

**“I continue to be blown away by the human-animal communications and how my dog seems to just know what’s needed and can offer something the rest of us can’t.” — PT VOLUNTEER**

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 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.**

Ultimately, the presence of PT teams helped break down barriers to young people’s ability to connect and engage — enhancing and amplifying the effectiveness of youth service supports and interventions, and strengthening known protective factors.

We also found that:

- PT had a profound impact on young people experiencing the greatest barriers to engagement.
- The volunteer delivery model was key to positive outcomes and cost-effective program delivery.
- Additional animal assisted programs aimed at engaging young people in skills development and work experience — delivered as part of an informal Youth Pathways pilot — provided opportunity to extend positive outcomes for young people facing barriers to training and employment.

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

Scan the QR Code for our Project Report

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## Increasing our impact

The evaluation identified four key actions:

- ✓ Invest in ongoing partnerships with existing and new youth services.
- ✓ Tailor PT models to align with social and emotional learning, educational curriculum and therapeutic practice.
- ✓ Trial using PT to support young people’s access and transition between services.
- ✓ Conduct formal trial of Animal Care Youth Pathways program.

To continue this work Lort Smith requires philanthropic, community and government investment in a collaborative funding model. Sustained funding will enable ongoing youth programming, and the research, development and implementation of evidence-informed PT models that create transformative impact for at-risk young people and the services that support them.

**“[The PT dog’s] impact on him was so profound. After the visit I can say for certain that this young person needs and deserves increased access to Pet Therapy.”**

— YOUTH SERVICE PARTNER





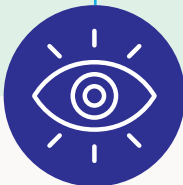
**YOUNG PEOPLE  
SPENT TIME WITH PET THERAPY TEAMS  
AT SPECIALIST YOUTH SERVICES**



**FELT SAFE & CALM**



**ACHIEVED A STATE OF EMOTIONAL REGULATION**



**FELT  
PRESENT**



**FELT  
CONNECTED**



**FELT  
CAPABLE**



**ENGAGED MORE IN THERAPEUTIC & EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES**



**STRENGTHENING  
PROTECTIVE FACTORS**



**AMPLIFYING EFFECTS OF YOUTH  
SERVICE INTERVENTIONS**

**REDUCING THE LIKELIHOOD OF DISENGAGEMENT FROM EDUCATION OR COMMUNITY,  
AND OF ENGAGING IN HIGH-RISK OR CRIMINAL BEHAVIOURS**