When Higgins and Eliza walked into the classroom, Michael’s eyes widened, a smile slowly spread across his face, and he said, “Time for pet therapy.” He immediately went to his daily schedule and moved the pet therapy picture into place. Michael is a 6-year-old boy with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). He and the other children in his class have delays in their verbal and nonverbal communication skills and difficulty with social interactions. Higgins and Eliza are two lovable cockapoos who help young children with ASD learn new words, expand the length of their sentences, try new activities, and interact with the world around them. The dogs’ presence in the preschool/kindergarten classroom creates an atmosphere of loving acceptance, improves the children’s attention and focus, and enhances the students’ ability to learn.

Higgins and Eliza, along with my husband, Greg, and I, have visited hundreds of preschool and kindergarten children since October 2007, but our special focus has been with one group of children on the autistic spectrum. During our weekly visits to their classroom, the children have developed relationships with the two dogs, which have blossomed into positive interactions with Greg and me. Not only have we noted an increase in the children’s verbalizations, but we also have seen improved eye contact and an increase in the children’s spontaneous conversation. On occasion the children make statements or ask questions about the dogs without prompting. The children love to hold, brush, and walk Higgins and Eliza, and they laugh out loud when the dogs jump over blocks, run through a tunnel, or race across the room when the children call them. Most of the activities we do in the classroom also can be done in the home setting.

Helping the children improve their communication skills is one of the goals of our Cockapoos in the Classroom program. During pet therapy sessions each child uses a sentence board to choose an activity to do with Higgins or Eliza. Pictures are used to represent the words in the sentence, and each child chooses an activity from two that are offered, moves the picture of that activity into the sentence, and then with modeling from a teacher verbalizes the sentence. If the two choices are “walk” or “brush,” the completed sentence would be either “I want to ‘walk’ Eliza;” or “I want to ‘brush’ Higgins.” We help the children focus their attention on the activity by singing as they ‘walk’ or ‘brush’ the dogs. Singing about what they are doing also helps the children transition into and out of the activity. The last line of the song is “... and now it’s time to stop.” We pause before saying “stop” to let the children complete the sentence on their own. Eliza knows the words to the song and always sits down just before the child says “stop.” Her sitting also helps the children transition from the walking activity back to the circle on the rug.

Improving social skills is another goal of the program. In contrast to relationships with other persons, relationships with dogs
provide safe, low-risk associations for children, especially for children with ASD. Higgins and Eliza are accepting of everyone they meet, and they are openly affectionate. Their wagging tails and wiggling bodies invite the children to interact with them, and the dogs always respond eagerly to the children’s overtures. Relationships with animals are more straightforward and less complex than relationships with human beings, and I have observed that children with ASD are more openly affectionate to Higgins and Eliza than they are to other children. Fortunately, however, forming relationships with Higgins and Eliza involves some of the same skills and behaviors the children need to relate to their peers and therefore serves as a foundation for developing these relationships. For example, recognizing and interpreting body language and being aware of another’s feelings are two skills that are important when relating to both animals and human beings.

With Higgins and Eliza providing the motivation, the Cockapoos in the Classroom program provides opportunities for the children to learn and practice appropriate social skills, such as greeting people, making eye contact, waiting for a turn, and listening while others are speaking. One of the children’s favorite activities is to “slap 5” with Higgins. Higgins always complies with their requests, ensuring that the experience will be a positive one for the children. The activity provides an opportunity for the children to wait for their turn, to listen and follow directions for how to hold their hands, and for asking Higgins to “slap 5,” which is a phrase used by children and adults. Children who initially demonstrated tactile sensitivity to Higgins’ fur now smile as his soft paw brushes across their palms, and they often request a second turn.

Another favorite activity is putting the missing parts on a large dog poster. This activity is a big hit because either Higgins or Eliza peeks over the top of the poster and watches as each child sticks an ear, eyes, nose and mouth, tail, paw, or collar on the three-foot-tall dog. The children say the name of the part they are putting on the dog and then locate the appropriate place for the part. The children laugh and clap their hands together when they see Higgins and Eliza looking at them over the top of the poster. One boy went behind the poster, looked over it himself, then turned to Higgins and said, “’C’mor, Higgins, get up here.”

Higgins and Eliza love to run through a tunnel. Greg sits the dogs at one end of the tunnel while I sit with one of the children at the other end. The child looks into the tunnel to get the dogs’ attention and then says “come.” The dogs run through the tunnel at full speed amid gales of laughter from the children. The children usually want to crawl through the tunnel themselves, so we pretend each child is a dog, and we say “wait” and “come” to mimic the experience the dogs have. Once again, the children have an opportunity to wait their turn and to follow directions. In addition, they are performing a motor activity and perhaps taking the perspective of a dog.

Both the dogs and the children enjoy negotiating obstacle courses. Eliza and I lead the way, followed by the students and teachers, with Higgins and Greg bringing up the rear. We weave a circuitous path around tables and chairs, jump over or step over blocks, and go through a tunnel. We may jump on the trampoline, wade through the ball pool, or go down the slide if we are in the therapy room. The children seem to enjoy doing what the dogs do and eagerly follow Eliza’s cues.

Each child has his or her own strengths and weaknesses, and in consultation with the special needs teacher, the speech-language pathologist, and the occupational and physical therapists, we adjust our activities and our expectations for each child to account for these differences. As pet assisted therapy dogs, Higgins and Eliza’s job is to bring love to those they visit, but when working with children with ASD, they contribute so much more. Higgins and Eliza create a fun-loving atmosphere in the classroom, which motivates the children to expand their skills and try new activities. Skill development is often a slow process when working with children on the autistic spectrum, and we celebrate each step forward cautiously, knowing that the next therapy session may reveal two steps backwards. What we have observed, however, over the course of our pet therapy visits, is that the children have increased their vocabularies, expanded their sentence length, and participated in sensory and motor activities that they may have avoided without the dogs’ presence. Because Higgins and Eliza offer less complex and more predictable social cues, the children have been able to engage in successful interactions with them. The children’s parents have reported to me that their children love Higgins and Eliza; and Higgins and Eliza certainly love being with the children. As soon as they see their “therapy dog” vests in my hand, they run around the room and then jump on the couch so they can get ready to go to their very rewarding job.

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