



-by Dr Nanditha Krishna

He was not a medical graduate but he was a doctor who helped autistic children in dog-assisted therapy at the Saraswathi Kendra Learning Centre, Chennai. And he was a Labrador, fondly called Dr Moosa, who left for his heavenly abode recently. A tribute to this angel who helped many children in need.

The therapist

Dr Moosa...

Moosa's first steps in SKLC....

Moosa and Sherry were two black Labrador cross siblings who arrived at the Saraswathi Kendra Learning Centre for Children (SKLC) in 2002. They had belonged to an NRI who lived in the Middle East. Unable to take care of the one-year-old, his family members dropped them off at the Blue Cross of India. I was in search of a Dr Dog, so Saraswathi Haksan, Hon Secretary of the Blue Cross sent them for this noble deed. Moosa and Sherry were very cute. When two bowls of food were placed before them, they would both eat from one and then from another. I realised that Sherry, the female would never make a Dr Dog – she was full of nervous energy. Moosa was placid and laid back, an idle doctor. But we had to wait.

The SKLC...

SKLC is a full-time school in India for children with autism, learning disabilities, dyslexia, ADD, behaviour & habit disorders, established in Chennai by The CP Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation in 1985. We started with the Dr Dog – Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) with the help of Jill Robinson of Animals Asia Foundation in 2001. AAT works with animals in a planned way to increase desirable behaviour, to improve abilities, to decrease undesirable behaviour, and to help individuals communicate.

The training...

A Dr Dog has to be at least two and spayed/neutered to be assessed. The siblings – Moosa and Sherry – were below one. We decided to use the year to train them. Rangarajan of Woodstock Kennels trained

them professionally. They learned to walk, sit, lie down, come to heel, shake hands and generally became much more subdued. Siva of The CP Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation was also trained to be their trainer.

Moosa becomes Dr Moosa...

Moosa started work in 2008. It took a while to introduce him to the children of SKLC. Initially they feared touching him, but soon realised he was harmless. The children had varied problems: LD, dyslexia, autism, ADD/ADHD. They were given instructions which they learned to hear, obey and follow. Children were given simple tasks like - take Moosa for a walk; take him to sit under the tree; shake hands with Moosa; tell the dog to come, to sit, to shake hands, etc. After some time, the children became bold, welcoming Moosa, taking him for a walk around the campus and so on. There was visible improvement in the children: they began to show excitement when he came, petted him, spoke to him and so on.

Then a new plan took shape. Each child was asked to introduce Moosa to others on different days. This forced them to acknowledge the other children, a major step. It was important to give the child and dog their personal space, yet allow for contact. The children were empowered to care for the dog (giving water, feeding), and using the dog as a focal point to encourage communication. The bond between child and dog is beautiful - when asked to write

Dr Dog is a very successful therapy programme which can change the lives of children with varying problems and needs. It needs the co-operative efforts of pet parents and special schools to function effectively.

an essay on 'My best friend', each child wrote about Moosa.

The benefits...

The therapist had to ensure that children were aware of the dog's needs and feelings, thereby teaching them to be unselfish, sharing (one child must not monopolise the dog) and caring. Children were allowed to talk freely about what they feel about dogs and other animals. Discipline and acceptable behaviour was made clear. The children had to pay attention to instructions. This increased their concentration skills.

Dr Dog has specific benefits, such as:

- Increase in verbal communication
- Increase in initiative
- Involvement in activities
- Indications of pleasure
- Increased co-operation with teachers
- Decrease in stereotypical/repetitive behaviour, including temper tantrums

Animal therapy engages the attention of children with various learning problems in a way that conventional therapy cannot. They score higher on measures of empathy, self-esteem and self-concept. Cognitive and social

development is helped. They develop a longer attention span, co-operation and greater focus in the classroom.

Dogs provide unquestioning love and attention, relaxation and a healthier lifestyle; an outlet for care-giving, making children feel needed; stable and less complicated relationships, security and stability; and provide a link to the natural world. Dr Dog creates a sense of capability – even superiority – in a child, who would hesitate to respond to an adult. They give unquestioning and undemanding love and are very calming and soothing.

We will miss you Dr Moosa...

But fate had something else in store, Moosa became sick. His last few days were painful, with liver and then kidney failure. The children were anxious and worried. The day before he died, they all came to see him. He was tired and ill, but he put out his hand and shook hands with his friends. The next day – February 1, 2012 – Moosa died suddenly. We did not want the children to know, but news travels fast. All his students swarmed around as he was laid to rest under a beautiful flowering Canonball (Nagalingam) tree. They were sullen and confused. They did not understand death, but they knew Moosa had gone. They would miss their 'best friend' – who helped them in more ways than we know. (Dr Nanditha Krishna is Director of The CP Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation, Chennai)