

# Doctor Moosa is not just another dog!

by Sonali Shenoy

**Chennai:** Four-legged Doctor Moosa may not have an MBBS degree, but he is the only dog in the city who has been certified to work with autistic children.

While he might seem just like any other happy-go-lucky labrador, it's his placid temperament that makes him suitable for 'dog-assisted therapy', which has made a world of difference to the students of the Saraswathi Kendra Learning Centre. So reveals his owner and pioneer behind a study on the same, Dr Nanditha C Krishna, Honorary director of the CP Ramaswamy Aiyar Foundation.

She says, "The most difficult problem that one encounters while dealing with autistic children is communication. The child, because of his/her mental condition, has a reduced ability to communicate with the outside



Doctor Moosa with children | MARTIN LOUIS

world. It is here that the dog comes into the picture as the teacher speaks to such kids through the animal."

Roshan, for instance, could never speak before this therapy. In 2001, nine-year-old Roshan opted for dog therapy sessions with a pup named Sachin. It was then that he uttered his first words, addressed to the pup, "Sachin, I had upna

for breakfast. What did you eat?" This kind of basic exchange then graduated to more specific learning exercises, ranging from commands like 'sit' and 'jump' to learning simple mathematics.

Explains Dr Nanditha, "We ask children to teach Moosa to count up to 10 steps to help them understand Mathematics."



Rashmi Kumar, a volunteer of the school and mother of an autistic son, agrees. She says, "I would take two children at a time for each session that would last about 45 minutes, twice a week. I would tell the children to walk Moosa around the playground three times and in that span, make him sit down five times." This kind of exercise encouraged

concentration, attention and more importantly, a sense of responsibility.

Ask the children what they think of Moosa, and most of them use similar adjectives to describe the obedient pet. "He is very kind," says 11-year-old Pranav, the most talkative of the lot. "And soft," adds another student, "and he never bites."

For Sriram, Moosa seems to be more than just a someone one can talk to, while in class.

"I told Moosa when I won a prize at my colouring competition and he wagged his tail," the child says gleefully. "He is my friend."

While more schools seem to be taking to the concept of dog-assisted therapy for autistic students, Dr Nanditha explains the reason why more trained 'doctor' dogs are not being certified. "For a dog to be certified, it must first be neutered. This is because they can be unpredictable when they have their cycles," she says.

However, she clarifies, "Most owners don't wish to sterilise a pedigree dog, and for such interactions with children, usually breeds such as labradors and labrador retrievers are opted for and in some cases, even a mongrel has been therapeutic."