

Special Dog Knows the Key to Unlocking Secrets

Child therapist's dog helps young patients open up.

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The effort paid off. When the children arrive at the shelter for their Tuesday night group session, Mina becomes as excited as they are. On a recent night, she sniffed some crumbled cookies in 6-year-old Bobbie's pants pocket and hounded him until Morganti intervened. "She used to go bonkers when the kids arrived, but she learned that she had to back off. She would get too wild because she's so people-oriented and loves children."

Group sessions start once the kids sign in on a wall chart that looks much like a calendar. Each box contains a primitive drawing of a face and a word to describe the child's mood - angry, happy, lonely and others. But Mina doesn't require that guidance. The children and Morganti sit on the floor in a circle, with a 4-foot length of golden fur in the center and a bushy tail slapping at the floor. Mina cocks her head as she studies the group. Her ears come forward. She listens intently as the children respond to their therapist's questions. Soon Mina selects the child she senses needs her support more than the others and moves closer. Morganti views Mina as both a stimulant and a calming influence for disturbed, anxious youngsters. The more the kids pet her, the more they begin to talk. When Mina looks into a child's eyes, it seems to start an emotional interaction that helps the child speak.

"It never ceases to amaze me," said Morganti, who grew up with dogs and loves Mina as her own. "She can worm her way into the hearts of kids who are terrorized by animals when they first come here. She is a perfect co-worker. She knows exactly the level I am at in my work with a child and always responds with the right degree of support."

Zanello concurred. "They make a perfect team. The kids recognize Julie's integrity and the love she has for them, and they sense that Mina's love is unconditional, too."

Not everyone always automatically loves Mina - at least, not at first. Some of the women who come to the shelter are withdrawn and afraid of animals. After meeting Mina, "they overcome those fears and can't wait for her arrival each week," said Patty Lou Boff, Safe House director.

The dog also works magic with older children. Morganti recalled a teen-age boy with Down syndrome who had difficulty communicating with the other children. Counselors sensed he was angry by the way he behaved, but they couldn't help him release his emotion. Then the boy met Mina.

"He had an unbelievable transformation," Morganti said. "Before he met Mina, he couldn't manage to put words together to be able to talk with us. After several sessions with Mina, he could speak audibly, and then he became calm and lost all the aggressiveness he had when he first arrived."