

Special Dog Knows the Key to Unlocking Secrets

Child therapist's dog helps young patients open up.

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No matter how hard she tried to get 4-year-old Debbie to smile, speak or interact with other children at weekly group sessions at the home for abused women and children, child therapist Julie Morganti failed. That's when she turned to Mina, her co-therapist and trusted secret weapon.

As in many other difficult cases, Mina began one-on-one therapy sessions with Debbie. The withdrawn child's defenses gradually broke down, and soon she was lying on the floor, hugging her therapist, a 6-year-old Golden Retriever almost twice her size.

"Debbie would whisper secrets into Mina's ear," Morganti said. "As she relaxed, she would talk louder. The first words we heard her say were, 'I love you, Mina. I want to take you home.' Before long, she was even talking directly to me."

Success stories like Debbie's, though measured in small steps, have become the norm since Mina began accompanying her owner, Peggy Zanello, to work at the shelter, The Safe House, serving Essex County, New Jersey. Zanello, an adult therapist, began the nonresident outreach program with Morganti four and a half years ago.

"I became aware that I owned a very special animal when she was just a tiny pup," Zanello said. "I brought her in a crate to a facility for the chronically mentally ill where I was working. She jumped into the lap of a man who had never talked before and began to snuggle as he chatted quietly with her."

After several similar experiences and watching the way her pet reacted with neighborhood children, Zanello recognized Mina sensed the people who most needed her attention. That realization launched several years of sensitivity training.

Zanello said she played with Mina for hours, working in the annoying kinds of poking and patting children do to dogs. Then she hired a professional obedience trainer. "It was a long power struggle with a very feisty, determined pet, but Mina finally learned that I was the leader," she said.