

Fantastic beasts and their value in youth work

The magic of animals on the resilience
of vulnerable adolescents

Study: Social Work

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*Solo and Charlie,
dreams and determination.*

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Preface

When the pandemic hit in 2020, I got cooped up in my apartment – like so many of us. As a teacher in a vocational school I had a hard time keeping in touch with my students, because they either did not have access to a computer, had to take up responsibilities in their families, or stopped caring about school all together because only the theoretical courses remained. Motivation declined so drastically it eventually resulted in several dropouts. I quickly came to realise neither my teacher's degree nor an additional two-year training with Teach for Belgium to support teachers in schools with vulnerable youngsters had prepared me to help them. I was going to need to step up my game.

Simultaneously in looking for ways to support my students, I tried to find manners to help myself cope with the pandemic. I decided to meet my exercise needs by taking a walk in the park every day. After being harassed multiple times, I had to start looking into other options. I reached out to my former neighbour and asked her if she needed any help in taking care of her horses. One thing led to another, and I found myself out of the city and back into the countryside. Not only did I feel at peace in the pasture, I could also feel my resilience growing and with it a desire to share this with youngsters like my students. And rest assured, this whole endeavour ended in adopting a senior rescue dog who keeps annoying people at bay, so all's well that ends well.

And thus, I decided to start studying social work with the idea of helping adolescents strengthen their well-being and resilience in an ever more demanding society by implementing nature in general and animals specifically.

During the past three years I have seen and read about amazing projects, both big and small, in schools, (care) farms, youth facilities and everything in between with the goal to empower adolescents. I am beyond thrilled to share some of these with you, along with research to underpin why nature and animals can have such a positive effect and can be an asset within youth work.

With this bachelor thesis I hope to tickle your interest, whether it stems from firm belief or healthy scepticism, about the incorporation of animals in your practice. Considering the nature of this paper, I will mainly focus on good practices in social work when

students are at risk of or classified as school dropout, yet at the same time I would like to emphasize these ideas can find their way into a school context as well as a measure against school dropout, perhaps suggested by a student counsellor.

I have written this paper to be a hands-on introduction interspersed with clear-cut illustrations to increase its accessibility – in comparison to my lofty and frankly quite boring master thesis that is only gathering dust on a forgotten library shelf.

Finally, I want to clarify this thesis' main focus is on practices in Flanders as reflected in the literature. The principal reason for writing in English is that these past years studying social work have made it clear that I will move abroad in the coming years to realise a green facility of my own.



Illustration 1 | *Horses prancing in a pasture with mountains in the far distance.*

Introduction

*Animals are such agreeable friends
– they ask no questions; they pass no criticisms.*
- George Eliot

Context

Adolescents struggle. They have to figure out who they are and what their role in society is going to be, all the while under the influence of peers and parents, school, and society. The majority seems to undergo this process much like a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly – there is a period of gooey uncertainty and possibility until decisions take shape and out comes a beautiful and fully formed creature, some vibrating with colour which makes them stand out, others seamlessly blending in with the environment as it is. They are quite different, yet equally worthy in constructing a world that makes it pleasant for all to live in.

However, a rising number of adolescents seem to struggle significantly more and are trapped in this sticky state considerably longer, experiencing difficulties to emerge as their unique self. Mental health problems have been a growing concern in recent years – even before the COVID-19 pandemic –, with rates of depression, anxiety and other mental health disorders increasing, resulting in a staggering number of over 20.000 youngsters on waiting lists for psychological help in Flanders. (Vlaamse Jeugdraad, 2023) At the same time, forced admissions are on the rise. (De Windt, 2023) Among others, these adolescents are at a higher risk of becoming a casualty of the education system, either by continually asking too much effort of them or dropping them in disciplines for which they have no interest, both resulting in a lack of motivation and fulfilment, even causing temporary time-outs or total drop-out. If they cannot find proper help in time to get their lives back on track, they might carry the consequences well into the future.

Luckily, there are numerous ways to help these adolescents. Traditional forms of therapy, such as cognitive-behavioural therapy or pharmacotherapy, have proven to be effective. (Hollon et al., 2002) However, some are not keen on these traditional approaches and are on the look-out for complementary or alternative methods.

Animal assisted Interventions (AAI) in general and animal assisted therapy (AAT) specifically are such alternative and holistic treatments that have gained popularity in recent years. AAI involves the use of animals as an actor to promote mental health and well-being. The implementation of animals has such great advantages for some that coaches declare it magical. (Musler et al., 2022)

Research objectives and methodology

First and foremost, this paper aims to answer the question *Why would animal assisted therapy (AAT) be an asset for social workers in the trajectory of vulnerable adolescents?*

In order to answer this question, the following sub-questions are addressed in the literature study: (1) *How do animals fit into the social work definition?*, (2) *How do animals provide added value into youth care?*, and (3) *How do animals fit into practice?*

Afterwards, the findings of the literature study will be compared to the approach at the farm of LEJO vzw in Brasschaat, near Antwerp, which focuses on students who have a hard time functioning in school and/or society by strengthening their resilience. Through individual counselling and group sessions in a peaceful setting in which the animals play a vital factor thanks to their disarming nature, the adolescents experience a place to catch their breath from the demanding world. Together with their peers, the animals and coaches they reconstruct and strengthen their personality and coping mechanisms so they can reclaim their place in society with respect for their own boundaries.

Finally, the combination of literature and input at LEJO vzw will form the outline of a SWOT analysis which in turn will form the basis for policy recommendations answering the question: *If and how should AAT be more widely implemented in the trajectories of vulnerable adolescents?*

Significance

Implementing animals in social work can be an alternative approach to reach and help youngsters who completely lack motivation or are tired of the care system and anyone who represents it. The benefits on an individual level can be significant, as well as on

a societal level. When these adolescents are empowered and their well-being and resilience is strengthened, the cost of the reimbursement – worth tens of millions of euros – of medication such as antidepressants by the national health insurance to pharmaceutical companies can be lowered, creating budget for other empowering projects. (Verhage & Merckx, 2019) Furthermore, to get in contact with nature does not only have individual benefits beyond health – such as better cognitive functioning, concentration, and emotion regulation –, but also results in a deeper understanding of the environment. This in turn leads to an increase of climate awareness and more urgency to conduct sustainable environmental behaviour, which benefits the society at large. (Duurzaam Educatiepunt, 2023)

However, this thesis is not a plea to give every six-year-old a rabbit. Quite the contrary, not everyone – not in the least the animal – would benefit from this situation. Conversely, I want to advocate to explore the opportunities to implement nature as a whole and animals specifically within an organisation. There is no need to abandon beaten paths, but it might be interesting to complement traditional approaches with new trails following footprints of our four-legged companions.

Emma's story

It is all too easy to talk about struggling adolescents in abstract numbers and figures, which makes the urgency to act less imperative. To make their stories heard, I came up with the story of Emma to serve as a guide throughout this thesis. Emma is a fictional character, merged from aspects of all youngsters I had the pleasure to encounter during my career as an educator and my internship at the farm of LEJO vzw in the spring of 2023. She represents all of them and their unmet needs because of the waiting lists that slow down the care system.

The story illustrates how animals can have a beneficial impact on someone's trajectory, and how they can help to strengthen well-being and resilience.

Emma is 15. She struggles with depressive feelings after being bullied relentlessly at school because of her timid nature. She has the feeling she does not fit in, never has, never will. When her parents divorced, she was so worried up to the point she crashed and could not make it to school anymore. This was over a year ago. Ever since, she has weekly sessions with a psychologist.

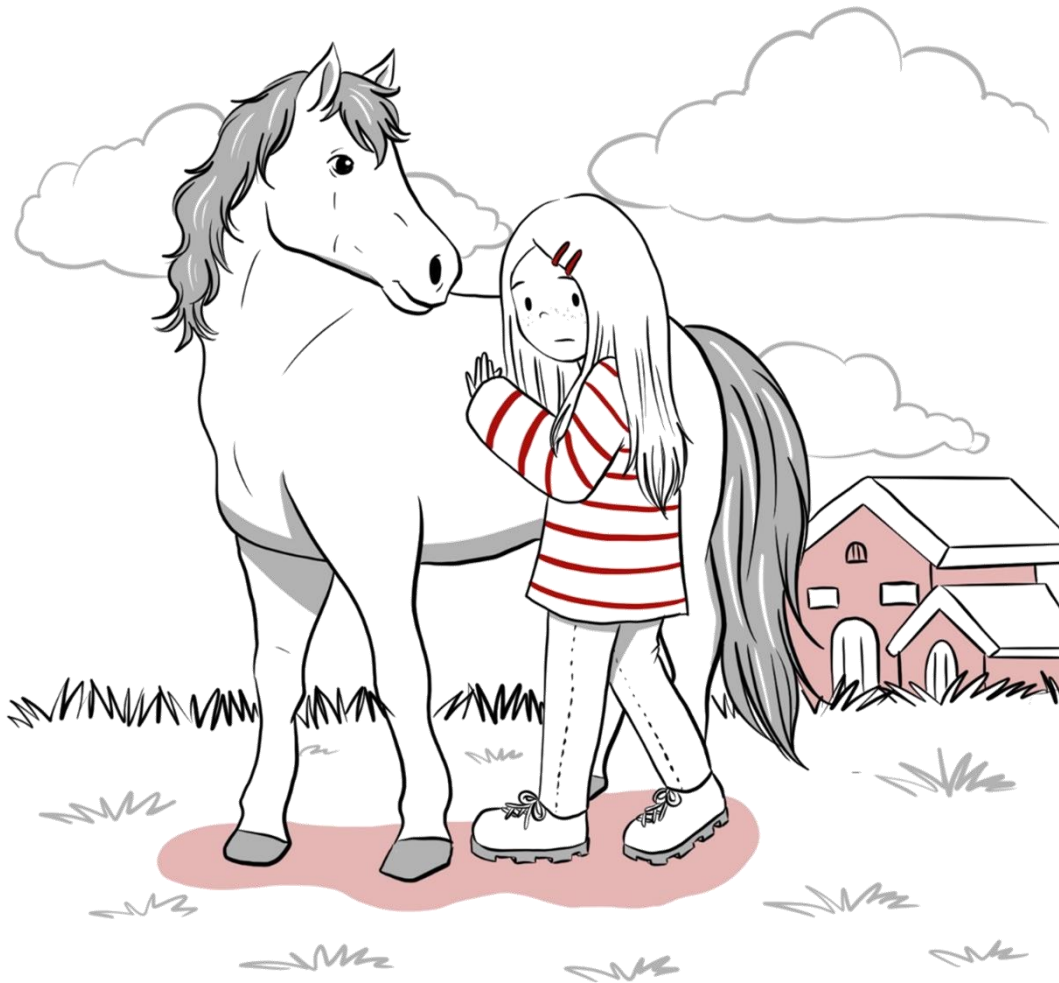


Illustration 2 | Introduction of Emma.

It became clear Emma would not be able to return to school anytime soon, so an alternative plan was worked out for her. She now comes to the farm twice a week, half a day for individual coaching and one full day in the group trajectory. Emma likes to be on the farm because it gets her out of her head. She finds tranquillity here which she has not been able to obtain anywhere else. On the farm, surrounded by all the animals who accept her as she is, she feels safe enough to start working on her resilience and social skills, and exploring her future academic options.

Literature study

There is a plethora of articles and books concerning animal assisted interventions (AAI) – ranging from general handbooks to specific guidelines in different settings such as therapeutic wards, elderly homes, facilities for people with disabilities, etc. – defining it as the utilization of various species of animals in diverse manners beneficial to humans. (*Animal-assisted Interventions: Definitions*, n.d.) In the context of this bachelor thesis, specifically targeting vulnerable youngsters who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), I sifted through these and other works to answer three questions:

1. How do animals fit into the social work definition?
2. How do animals provide added value to youth work?
3. How do animals fit into practice?

It is both unescapable and unfortunate that the answers to these questions result in cherry picking from the aforementioned abundance in order to come to an accessible yet critical thesis. Anyone looking for a deeper dive into the topic, can find a shortlist of the most comprehensive works in the *further reading* section at the end of this thesis.

1 How do animals fit into the social work definition?

One way to check if AAI can be part of a social work framework, is by analysing how well it agrees with the global definition of social work as formulated by the International Federation of Social Workers (ISFW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in 2014: (Tirions et al., 2019, p. 35)

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels.

Since it is impossible to touch on every aspect of this comprehensive definition, I will highlight three elements that bring forward interesting and compelling perspectives: *human rights, empowerment and indigenous knowledges.*

1.1 Perspective 1 | Human rights

Kids don't fail. Teachers fail, school systems fail.

The people who teach children that they are failures, they are the problem.

- Marva Collins

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights concerns education and states the following: (United Nations, n.d.)

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

I will not address the first paragraph of Article 26, since it is not the availability of education that forms the largest problem in small and population-dense Flanders. I would rather like to focus on the second paragraph, where the Article emphasizes the full development of the human personality.

In my years as a teacher in so-called challenging schools with a high level of students with a low social-economic status, my students kept saying time and time again that

they seldom felt seen and heard as a complete and complex individual. They often felt treated like they were only a student who had to obey without considering the responsibilities they bore and the hardships they faced on a daily basis. This resulted in less time to spend on school and/or a lack of motivation, consequently leading to lower grades which could cause them to double their year or skip school all together. Research confirms that Flanders suffers from an immense inequality between its students. The socio-economic background of students is strongly related to their performances at school and determines their educational chances. In preschool education, these toddlers participate less, start on a later age and have an increased risk of delay. This disadvantage is amplified in primary and secondary school, with children who are more often referred to either special education or vocational schools or have to double their year. (Tirions et al., 2019)

The latest numbers concerning school dropout in Flanders date back from 2019, showing an astonishing 9,4% of students who left school without a degree or qualification. (*Cijfers over schooluitval*, n.d.) In vocation schools, this number even climbs up to 17% compared to 2% in schools who offer a more theoretical curriculum. (“Vroegtijdig schoolverlaten in het Vlaams onderwijs”, 2019) Year after year, this concerns approximately 6.000 adolescents and young adults in Flanders, with a higher concentration of dropouts in the larger cities. (*Schoolverlatersrapport*, n.d.) Furthermore, school dropout is more prevalent in schools with a higher number of students with a lower socio-economic status and where the relationship between students and teachers is experienced as less positive. (Tirions et al., 2019)

Obviously, school dropout is only one way to measure the effectiveness of the classic education system, since youngsters can decide to learn somewhere else or opt for a career without a degree. Therefore it is interesting to look at the Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) numbers in the same reference year, 2019. Statistics show that 7,5% of youngsters aged 15-24 fell under the criteria of NEET, which is slightly lower than the 9,4% of dropouts. (*In 2022, 6.6% of People Aged 15-24 Were Not in Education, Employment or Training | Statbel*, 2023) However, in absolute numbers this results in approximately 53 860 youngsters who were – at first glance –

not participating actively in society. (On 1st January 2019, Belgium Had 11,431,406 Inhabitants | Statbel, 2019)

Not only do these youngsters fail to achieve the right to education, all the above also comes with a personal and societal impact, which at once makes clear why this is a topic for social workers. For the youngsters themselves, school dropout negatively affects both their professional career and life course. It increases their chances of less favourable working conditions, long-term unemployment, mental and physical health problems, and poverty. Society pays the bill for those who qualify as NEET in forms of welfare benefits, unemployment allowances, public service costs and tax revenue losses. (Elen & Thys, 2020)

Even though a lot can be said and done about the school structure in Flanders that would benefit students, this is not the goal of this thesis. Numerous articles and books on the subject have been published which form a far more adequate answer to this multi-layered issue than I ever could in such a brief paper. The goal of this thesis, however, is to help those who are at risk of or have fallen through the gaps in the educational and societal webbing to get back on their feet, aided by animals whenever it would add value in their journey.

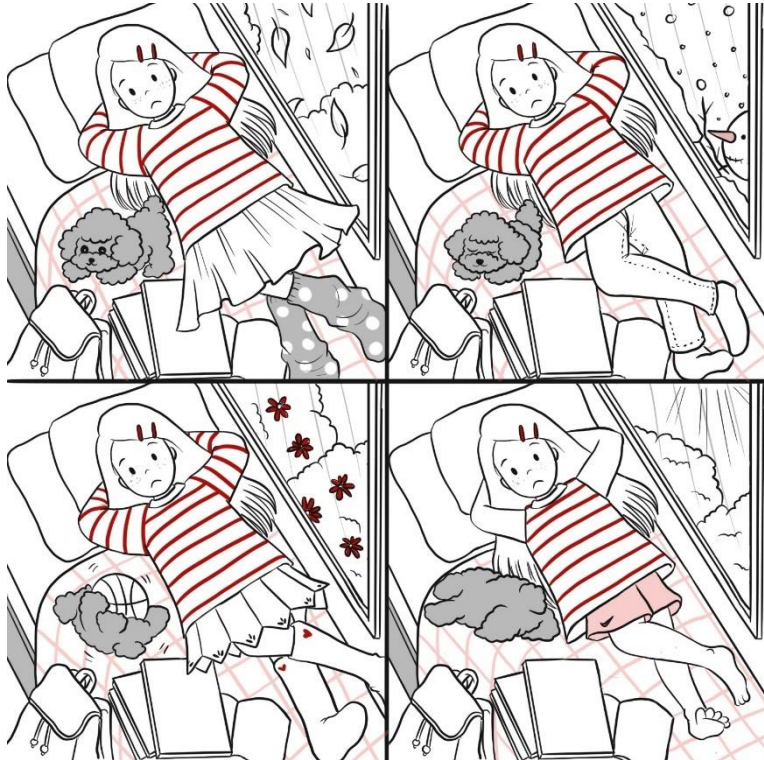


Illustration 3 | Emma has not been at school for a year because she keeps fighting with her thoughts.

1.2 Perspective 2 | Empowerment

Everything is within your power, and your power is within you.

- Janice Trachtman

According to the Person-In-Environment Empowerment Theory (PIE ET), a person's quality of life depends on both the individual and their environment. However, quality of life is subjective, depending on each individual's necessities in life and how well those are being fulfilled. (De Mönnink, 2016)

This point of view can be closely linked to the Capability Theory by Martha Nussbaum, which encourages social workers to help clients achieve a qualitative good and valuable life, in so striving towards social justice. The interpretation of such a life is highly individual. Nussbaum listed ten essential and universal capabilities, which form the threshold to human development and a dignified life. Interesting for this paper, is that one of these capabilities explicitly focuses on biology, stating as the 8th capability: *Other Species – Able to have concern for and live with other animals, plants and the environment at large.* (Tirions et al., 2019, p. 422)

Empowerment can be a tool to reach a better quality of life, looking for sources of strength and support in socially vulnerable individuals, groups or communities and connecting those to sources in a larger social and political environment. PIE ET is a positive approach, focusing on and believing in the resources within each individual and their environment. Clients are seen as people who have a problem, rather than problems themselves. Hence, there is room for a friendly and mutually respectful relationship between caretaker and caregiver in search of solutions, in stark contrast with linear and strictly defined procedures focusing on problems. (Tirions et al., 2019)

1.2.1 Strengths Model of Case Management

An interesting model within PIE ET and highly applicable in the context of AAI, is the Strengths Model of Case Management by Charles Rapp and Richard Goscha, as illustrated on page 11. (Tirions et al., 2019)

This model brings forward a positive perspective focusing on resilience, by addressing a client's aspirations, competencies, and confidence as well as their surrounding's

resources, social relations and opportunities. The strength of this model lies within the interaction between both these internal and external factors. Together, they can form a niche or so-called nest of possibilities which in turn can lead to the creation of desired results. Working within the framework provided by this model, means identifying the desired outcome and tracing back which resources should be altered to reach this goal. It is important to note that all elements are in continual interaction with one another and merge into the nest of possibilities from where positive change can take place. (Tirions et al., 2019)

1.2.1.1 Internal resources

The first internal resource are the *aspirations* of the client – what does the client want? This element focuses on their desires, goals, ambitions, hopes, and dreams. Sometimes these have faded into the background because of failure, hardship or traumatic events. The Strengths Model aims to support the client in rekindling these aspirations. (Tirions et al., 2019)

Secondly, the social worker helps the client to recognise thier *competencies* – what is the client capable of? In the Strengths Model, competencies include skills, attitudes, knowledge and talents. Coping strategies that were once helpful in navigating troubled waters, can turn out to be harmful in the development of these competencies. A caregiver can not only assist in making the distinction between the two and help explore and nurture competencies, but help focusing on the resilience many clients show as well. (Tirions et al., 2019)

The final internal resource is *confidence* – what does the client (not) dare? Often, this resource has been dulled. A caregiver can help build confidence anew by realising small successes in a respectful and participative environment. (Tirions et al., 2019)

1.2.1.2 External resources

The first external resource are the *resources* as such. This includes material goods and the care system, such as the right to income, housing, public transport etc. It is important to take these into account and to look for possibilities to meet the needs within this domain. (Tirions et al., 2019)

The second external resource are *social relations*. The network needs to be mapped, noting down who is part of it and what the network has to offer in terms of financial support, care, recreation etc. Clients often finds themselves in social isolation. The caregiver can support the client in meeting new people and broaden their network. (Tirions et al., 2019)

Thirdly, *opportunities* add to the external resources. This can be very broad, ranging from associations where the client could feel like they belong, over services they can call upon, to organisations where they can grow their skillset and everything in between. All of these opportunities can be found in the environment and community when the clients is supported to explore the options. (Tirions et al., 2019)

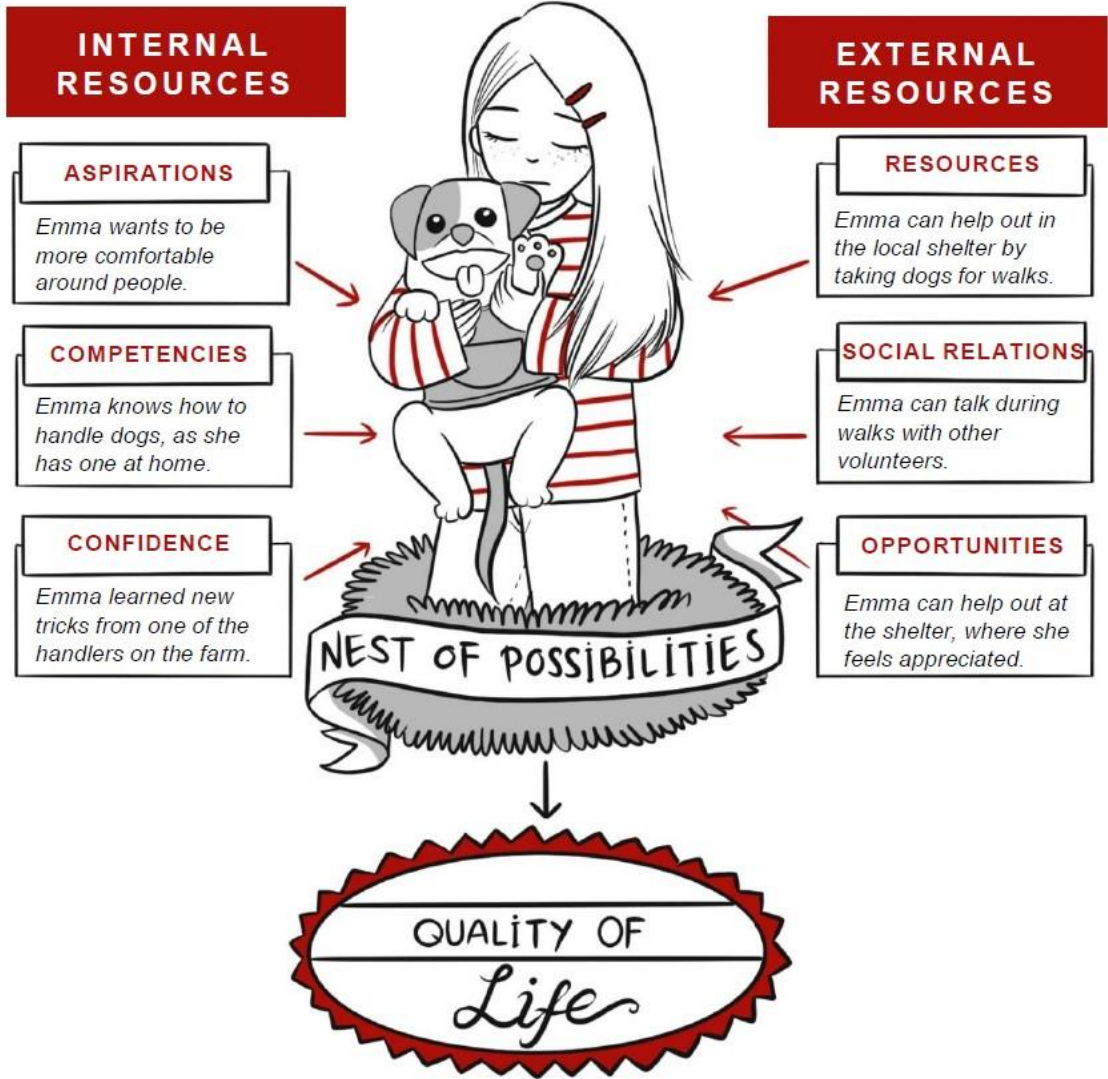


Illustration 4 | Emma positioned in the Strengths Model of Case Management by Rapp and Goscha.

1.3 Perspective 3 | Indigenous knowledges

The more I know, the more I know that I don't know.

- Socrates

This next part might invoke some scepticism because the following concepts feel rather alien to people whose lives have been structured by clocks and concrete. Animism, shamanism and the liminality theory all sound a bit far-fetched or even like odd curiosities from a different time with no place in the present – even though these are still practised today in secluded cultures around the world. With a background in history, I could not help but feel intrigued by these ancient practices which I had only briefly brushed past in my previous studies. However, the more I read about these concepts, the more their principles resonated with me. Even if one does not fully understand or accept the following concepts, these small snippets can be an invitation to explore the knowledge held by indigenous cultures in this and many other topics.

1.3.1 Animism

Animism is believed to be one of the most archaic belief systems, typically linked to hunter-gatherer societies. In this particular belief system, invisible souls, spirits or essences inhabit all living creatures, natural objects, and phenomena. When spirits are offended, for example when an animal is killed, they can plot revenge by attacking the spirit who caused the wrongdoing. Therefore, animals are treated with the utmost respect in these societies and killing an animal is not done light-hearted. (Kintaert, 2020) When the decision is made that an animal should be killed, hunters perform rituals to appease its spirit. (Serpell, 2015)

There is so much more to animism than this brief summary can contain, but that would lead us astray. By no means I think we should hesitate to move a rock, start crying when we accidentally snap a twig or feel like world's greatest villain for eating steak at a family barbecue. But I do think it is important to make informed, respectful and sustainable decisions and to consider the impact of one's actions on the environment at large. Social workers can – and, according to the green social work approach, should – be a role model. For example, and fitting for this thesis, by not consuming meat of industrially raised and slaughtered cattle.

Green social work

According to this approach which started in the wake of the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, social inequalities are closely linked to environmental inequalities. (De Mönnink, 2016) Social workers have an important part to play by focusing on sustainable development, since the current unequal distribution of resources and power has a direct impact on people's well-being. Environmental justice and social justice are two sides of the same coin. Unfortunately, there is no consensus yet about what social and economic sustainability entails, let alone how to politically act on it. (Papadimitriou, 2022)

1.3.2 Shamanism

Shamanism can be seen as an extension of animism, in which a person is very skilled to get in touch with their essence, also referred to as guardian spirit, by reaching a state of ecstasy. These people became known as shamans and are believed to have talents closely linked to their natural surroundings, such as being able to predict and even manipulate the weather and knowing the whereabouts of game. (Serpell, 2015) This proximity with nature is rooted in an ecological belief system in which humans are in no way superior to other life forms. Moreover, in this worldview ecology, economy, and social structures play an equal part. (Kintaert, 2020)

Even though a symbiosis of these three elements seems quite unattainable in a western world view, there is great value to be unearthed in this frame of reference which can be acquired by getting more in touch with nature. Unfortunately, a recent study showed that students in Flemish secondary schools, especially in urban areas, have very little access to nature which negatively impacts both their appreciation for their surroundings, and their physical and mental well-being. The study firmly encourages educators to venture out more often, since students are not likely to take the first step on their own. (Duurzaam Educatiepunt, 2023)

1.3.3 Liminality theory

Liminality is a sociological concept that stems from anthropological studies, indicating the middle phase in a ritual process in which a person is simultaneously *no longer* and *not yet*. For example, when a boy has to undertake a journey to come back as a man

in a hunter-gatherer society, this journey is the liminal phase in which he is no longer a boy, albeit not yet a man. The term could be derived both from the Latin *limes*, meaning threshold, or *limen*, meaning boundary or limit. Both are equally apt in conveying the idea of liminality. (Kamsteeg et al., 2011) During these rites of passage participants find themselves in a no man's land, where there is no clear hierarchy between student and teacher – who can take the form of other people or animals. Instead, a neutral zone is created where one can transition to a new dimension of oneself. The absence of authoritarian figures, the minimising of differences between participants and a strong orientation on the task contribute to this neutral zone where self-discovery and self-development are encouraged. (Kintaert, 2020)

For plenty of people who feel forced to work on themselves in the office of a therapist or social worker and thus have built a lot of resistance, this zone feels more welcome to explore and discover. As animals often have a dismantling effect since they show little interest in being authoritarian, they can help to deconstruct resistance as well. Furthermore, the incorporation of rituals, such as a circle talk around a bonfire at the start of the day, strengthens the existence of this liminal space where caregiver and caretaker are equal in worth, yet different in role. (Kintaert, 2020)

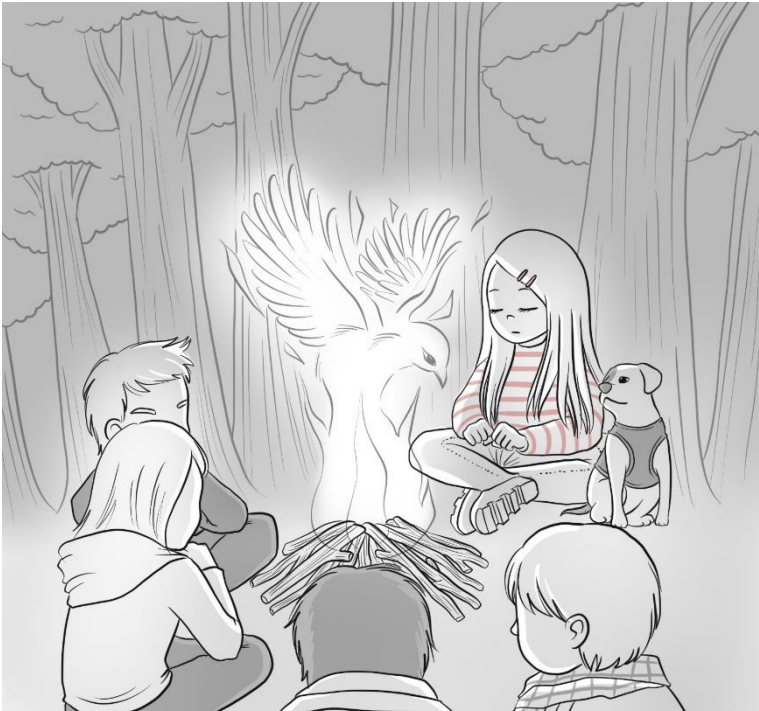


Illustration 5 | Emma experiences tranquility and a sense of belonging at the bonfire, surrounded by animals and her peers.

2 How do animals provide added value into youth work?

The first part explored the legitimacy of AAI in social work by looking for junctions with the social work definition. It demonstrated AAI has potential within social work, the *how* and *why* will be described in this chapter with a focus on youth work, detailing the different types of AAI in the first part and indicating the most important effects on the client's well-being and social relations in the second and third part.

2.1 Clarification | Types of animal assisted interventions

*Animals are reliable, many full of love, true in their affections,
predictable in their actions, grateful and loyal.*

Difficult standards for people to live up to.

- Alfred A. Montapert

During psychotherapy sessions, Sigmund Freud often found himself accompanied by Jofi, his Chow Chow. The dog's presence was meant to comfort him, but soon he realised it helped his patients as well, most remarkably children and adolescents. When she was in the room, they were not only more engaged but also more willing to discuss painful topics and soften their resistance for therapy. (Coren, 2015)

After Freud's observations about the positive impact of the presence of his dog in the beginning of the 20th century, there seems to be a period of quiescence in the field until child psychiatrist Boris Levinson got the research back up and running in the 1960s. He coined the term *pet therapy* after witnessing withdrawn children, who refused communication with him, connecting effortlessly to his dog Jingles. At first, they continued to ignore him and only incorporated the dog in their fantasy world. When he, through his dog, gave himself a place in their world, he managed to establish a first connection which could evolve into a therapeutic relationship. According to Levinson, animals have therapeutic value thanks to their friendly presence, and the comfort and safety they provide in moments of solitude, rejection and crisis. Their kindness and the affection they show is unconditional and without judgement. (Kintaert, 2020)

Since the 1960s, research has been conducted considering the impact of animals on people both in and out therapeutical settings, investigating physiological responses such as more regular breathing, slowing of the heart beat and relaxation of muscles as

well as a lowering of the sympathetic nervous activity system and the corresponding reduction of stress levels. Even though the science behind the research is still in its early stages, animals are already widely used to help people deal with a wide variety of problems. Animals that assist with physical difficulties, such as guide dogs for the blind, handicap assistance dogs, and seizure alert dogs, have become rather common. More recently, animals have been used for psychological problems as well, such as treatment concerning cognitive functioning, social interaction and conditions such as autism. In the field of education, AAI is slowly taking root as well to improve motivation and the attention span of children, for example when reading assistance dogs are used. (Coren, 2015)

In other words, there is a whole spectrum of animal assisted interventions. These can be schematically illustrated with three main branches, each clustering different components. Animal assisted activities (AAA) is the first and most approachable branch, in which animals are part of activities, though without a desired outcome. Their presence is merely used as a means to spark joy, for example during a hospital visit. In animal assisted therapy (AAT) however, therapeutical goals are pursued in order to enhance the psychological, physical or social well-being of the client. Animal assisted social work (AAT-SW) falls under this category, traditionally – but not exclusively – linked to working dogs in courthouses or police stations whose job it is to support victims by their calm presence so they can process the events that took place. The third branch covers animal assisted education (AAE), where for example children can be encouraged to hone their reading skills by reading for an unjudgmental animal. (Fine et al., 2015)

Two important remarks should be made. First and foremost, AAT is complementary to existing forms of therapy. It does not claim to be a miracle solution to every problem, yet shows promising results in forcing breakthroughs in clients who show a high level of resistance and distrust against the care system and anyone representing it. Secondly, introducing an animal into any care setting – whether it is as a companion animal in AAA or a working animal in AAT or AAE – requires a lot of training and focus from both animal and handler. Specialized training, certification and standards of practice must therefore be considered. (Kintaert, 2020)

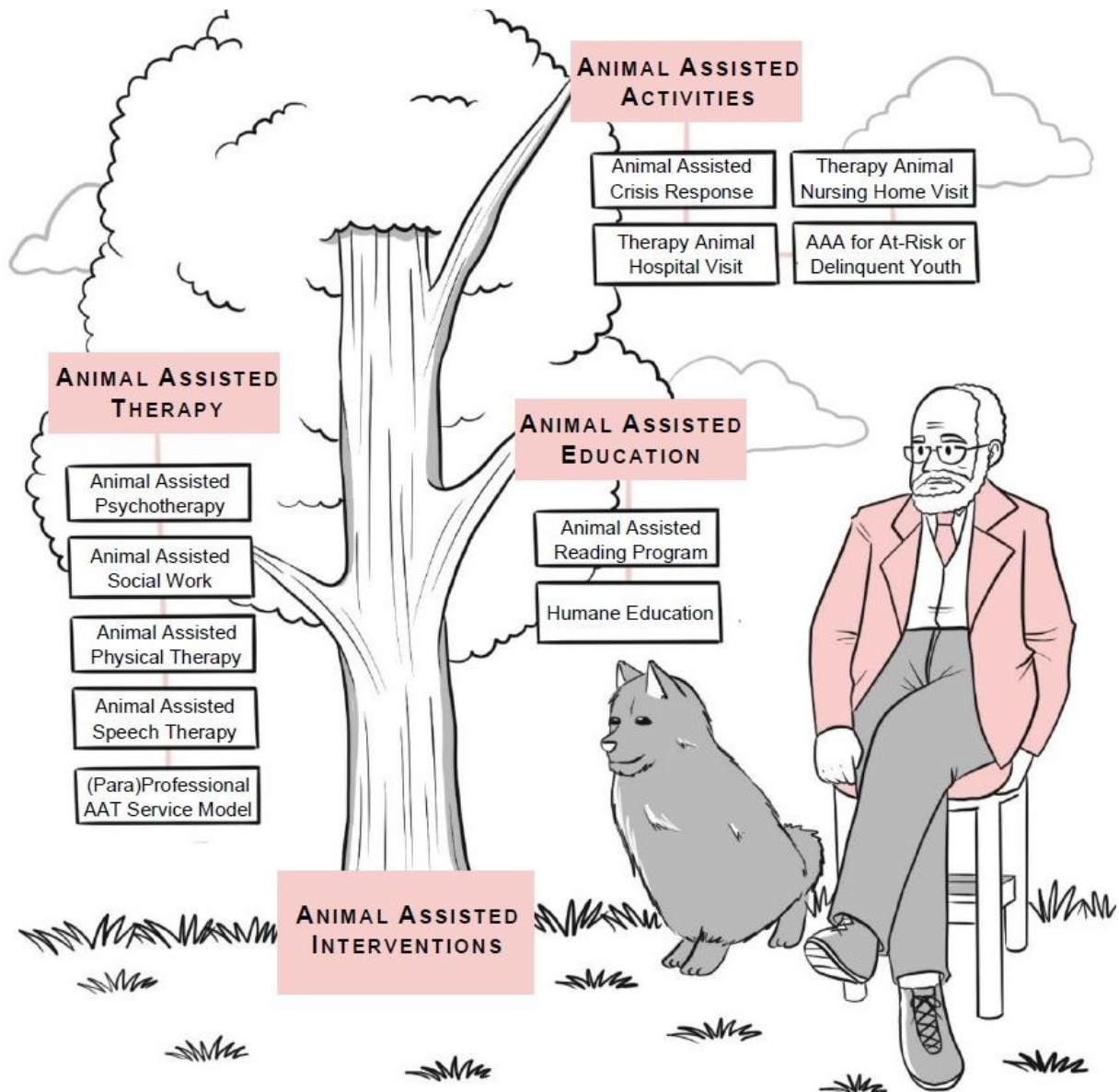


Illustration 6 | Schematic representation of the different types of animal assisted interventions, flanked by founder Freud and his Chow Chow Jofi.

2.2 Internal effects | Impact on the self

Because of the dog's joyfulness, our own is increased.

It is no small gift.

- Mary Oliver.

It is a rare person who remains completely unphased at the sight of a cute and playful puppy. Both animals in particular and nature in general tend to provoke a reaction in humans. This can be explained by the biophilia theory and can be used in the advantage of the client in their trajectory. Furthermore, animals can have an impact by increasing a client's motivation and reducing their stress levels.

However, it is important to note that this chapter is a generalisation. Each individual will react differently to animals. Someone who is scared of or dislikes animals – whether it stems from trauma, cultural perceptions or another origin – is less likely to experience the following positive effects.

2.2.1 Biophilia theory

The biophilia theory – derived from the Greek βίος (bios), life and φιλία (philia), love or friendship – states that humans have an intrinsic longing to connect with fauna and flora. (Fine & Beck, 2015) In other words, humans feel an innate need to be around, relate with, and understand nature. It brings us a sense of comfort to spend time around nature – even when it is as feeble as watching a fish tank in the dentist's office or a documentary on television. (TELUS Talks, 2023)

This sense of comfort or familiarity does not mean we only get to experience positive emotions. The presence of nature invokes all types of emotions, ranging from wonder, fascination and peacefulness to apathy, aversion and anxiety. These emotions are a consequence of existing in hunter-gatherer societies for millennia, when survival was highly dependent on one's relation with nature. Moreover, environments meeting a setting in which survival is likely – including water bodies, trees providing nuts or fruits and shade, and possible shelters – contribute to a feeling of safety, which is essential in social work before introducing or stimulating change. Clients who find themselves in a constant survival mode because of their issues can benefit greatly from such an environment because it can help them calm down on a subconscious level, in contrast

to typical care contexts. These often are too complex, overwhelming, incentive-rich, and deprived from nature, all factors that do not help clients feel at ease. (Kintaert, 2020b)

2.2.2 Motivation

When a client experiences a lack of motivation – because they not feel safe in the setting, do not trust their caregivers, resists the used methods, lack privacy or calmness, experience overstimulation, etc. – this can result in a difficult trajectory. Without intrinsic motivation, the client will be more reluctant to take their first steps. (Kintaert, 2020b) Animals can inspire and motivate people to participate in constructive activities, which they would otherwise decline. Without animals, it would take a lot more external motivation to get people to the same level of participation and determination. (Kintaert, 2020)

A striking example to illustrate this concept is told by Dr. Aubrey H. Fine, who works with children with behavioural and learning disabilities. One day, he brought his gerbil to a group of children who had difficulties to sit still because of ADHD. However, they were all mesmerized by this little creature and were very curious as to why it was there. One child promised to sit still if he could hold it and, against all odds, delivered. This is but one illustration of how animals can provide both a motivational factor and a sense of self-regulation. (TELUS Talks, 2023)

Animals can motivate for an array of reasons. They bring joy, unconditional love and reassurance because of their physical proximity. (TELUS Talks, 2023) When given the responsibility to take care of an animal, youngsters experience their actions have an immediate impact. In doing so, they learn they matter which in turn helps them to grow and develop their self-worth. In addition, feeding, brushing, mucking out stables etc. requires activity, which can be a rewarding counterbalance to a more classic setting in which the client is supposed to sit and talk about their difficulties. In caring for an animal, there is the possibility to simply be without the necessity of having a productive session. By taking away this feeling of constantly being monitored, the mental and emotional pressure can be reduced, and the client can work on their own pace. Apart from tranquillity, animals also come with unexpected challenges. This can be beneficial

as well because it keeps clients alert and gives them a temporary break from their exhaustive pondering. (Kintaert, 2020) This approach fits seamlessly into working in diluted severity, in which the focus shifts from difficulties to seemingly unrelated activities, thus taking away the pressure and creating space for said difficulties. (Beurskens et al., 2020)

2.2.3 Stress

Before talking about the stress-reducing impact of animals, it is important to distinguish different types of stress. First, there is exciting stress, which is positive. It helps us to be alert and ready to spring into action – this is useful during a job interview, when meeting a deadline etc. Secondly, there is frustrating stress – for example when you are stuck in traffic. This stress does not help you to be more productive, but, just as with the first type of stress, it does not have a negative impact when it does not last long, and the body can return to a state of calmness. However, when either type of stress persists for a long time, it can turn to harmful or toxic stress. The body cannot get a chance to wind down and recharge, thus continually draining its battery until burn-out, depression or anxiety disorders make an appearance. (Mouton, 2022)

Stress causes the body to produce fewer immune cells, resulting in health problems. Nearly all body parts and functions can be damaged by toxic stress. (De Mönnink, 2016) This outs itself in different ways, both physically – headaches, palpitations, cramped shoulders, etc. – and emotionally – brooding, having trouble sleeping, reacting harshly, etc. However, apart from these observable manifestations, stress is also perceptible on a hormonal level. Cortisol is released under stressful events, both physical and psychological. (Mouton, 2022)

Research shows that being in the presence of animals one feels comfortable with, significantly reduces cortisol levels. (TELUS Talks, 2023) When the animals are being held, this effect is even amplified. (Fine & Beck, 2015) As a result, stress related diseases – such as anxiety disorders, cardiovascular diseases and depression – decrease as well. Associated with stress relief, people tend to feel happier, more energised and quick-witted, and show an increase in concentration, (Kintaert, 2020b) On a physiological level more regular breathing, a slower heartbeat and more relaxed

muscles could be observed. (Coren, 2015) Children even showed less stress in a set-up stressful situation when accompanied by a dog than a supportive unknown human. (Kintaert, 2020)

These direct effects have immense value concerning mental health. Additionally, by acting as a stress buffer, animals can become a form of social support for humans. Evidence indicates that in particular circumstances the benefits of having a pet are similar to the presence of a human social support network. (Kintaert, 2020) Companion animals can counter social isolation and loneliness, which shows to be a significant health factor equal to smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. (TELUS Talks, 2023) Friendship does not exclusively have to be human/human in nature, but can be with animals as well. The effect of this reciprocal relationship of giving and receiving love is significant on a neurochemical level. (Fine & Beck, 2015)

When a client's stress levels have decreased enough and there is room for growth, they can start working on diminishing their bearing load – by making conscious choices and avoiding energy guzzlers – and enlarging their carrying capacity – by strengthening one's resilience – so that future stress becomes manageable. (Mouton, 2022).



Illustration 7 | By taking care of the animals, Emma takes care of herself.

2.3 External effects | Impact on relationships

We can judge the heart of a man by his treatment of animals.

- Immanuel Kant

When someone feels better about themselves, the time is ripe to build or strengthen their social skills and network. Adolescents in the care system often show aversion and distrust against yet another adult caregiver who tells them what the best course of action is, without truly listening to their wishes – especially when they have suffered neglect or abuse from their parental figures.

Animals can not only help to break down walls within, but they can also enable new and safe relationships by breaking old and harming attachment cycles. When trust between caretaker and caregiver is established, the client is ready to face their own role in relationships. Animals prove to be an interesting tutor in this matter by functioning as a mirror. Later, they can help contribute to establish meaningful social relations by learning in group.

2.3.1 A new attachment pattern

Humans are social beings, we are constantly looking to connect, to belong. Babies and children depend on their caregivers to provide them with food, warmth and protection. When these basic survival needs are met, a baby or child can safely attach to these caregivers. It forms a solid foundation for development and the creation of self-confidence. When something goes askew in early childhood, negative attachment patterns can be constructed in the search of safety. Approximately fifty percent of people have an unsafe attachment style. (Mouton, 2022) This has an enormous impact on well-being since negative attachment patterns cause stress to increase and lead to a reduction in social support, whereas positive attachment patterns result in a decline of stress, aggression, fear, and depression, while stimulating and facilitating social interaction, communication with and trust in others, as well as making it easier to learn. (Kintaert, 2020)

It is no easy feat to disrupt unsafe attachment patterns, since children tend to repeat what is known to them in new relationships with caregivers, teachers and therapists. Thus, the pattern becomes ingrained, hindering future relationships and development.

(Kintaert, 2020) This is particularly problematic regarding the trust relationship between caregiver and caretaker, knowing this is one of the prime factors of the success of any assistance programme and additionally one of the most important motivators to install change in a client's life. (Tirions et al., 2019)

Remarkably, there is no transmission of unsafe human/human attachment patterns to human/animal attachment patterns when the animal meets the four criteria of a full-fledged attachment figure; (1) the animal allows exploration and is a reliable source of comfort and reassurance, (2) in case of emotional stress, the animal is approached in order to gain security, (3) to be physically close to the animal is experienced as positive, and (4) the absence of the animal is experienced as negative. (Kintaert, 2020) It is not entirely clear why animals invite children to attach safely to them, but their indifference to material possessions, status, well-being and social skills as well as the absence of spoken language are suggested in research. (Fine & Beck, 2015) When a safe attachment has taken place, the animal can be considered a secure base to transfer this healthy pattern to a trust relationship with a coach or therapist, and to be repeated later on in new relationships. Children have shown to attach faster to caretakers associated with or responsible for animals. Empowered by this safe relation, one can start to take a closer look inwards and to disruptive patterns outwards. (Kintaert, 2020)

It is important to note that the relationship between humans and animals can be mutually beneficial. This has been shown clearest in research involving dogs. When in the presence of dogs and even more so when given affection, oxytocin levels – also known as the love hormone which is responsible for attachment – in both humans and dogs rose. Oxytocin gives people a feeling of happiness and contentment, while contributing to a feeling of connection. In high levels, the human body returns more swiftly to a calm state, fear is more easily suppressed, and a higher resilience to stress and addiction could be observed. (Kintaert, 2020) Therefore, a life with animals can make people feel safer and more grounded, while also benefitting the animal when taken proper care of. (Fine & Beck, 2015)

2.3.2 Mirror function

Pets are loved and spoiled, yet very few of them live a life in the proximity of their kin or get to decide when they eat or how to spend their day. It is a human – whether they call themselves a fur friend, parent or owner – whom an animal cannot talk to, who manages everything in its life. The parallel for adolescents in the care system is easily made, when they find themselves subject to caregivers and even judges who decide what is best for them. This happens sometimes with little to no regard for their own wishes while removing them from their familiar context. (Kintaert, 2020b)

When youngsters correlate their situation to that of an animal and start projecting their feelings and experiences, the animal can act as a therapeutic mirror. (Kintaert, 2020)

The needs of the animal can be investigated, just like its behavioural patterns, habits, and coping mechanisms by looking through the eyes of the animal. This creates a safe distance to explore the client's own thoughts and actions from a meta perspective in which neutrality is key. This is no easy thought experiment for a lot of adolescents but is facilitated because of the presence of the animal that is easily experienced as neutral or positive. The same exercise from their own or another person's point of view, would prove to be a bigger challenge. Even at this stage, before the transfer to other people is made, this exercise prepares the client to face new social challenges and enter new relationships. (Kintaert, 2020b)

In order to succeed in this thought experiment, clients have to learn to let go of suspicion since animals do not play a role, and at the same time sharpen their observational skills since animals communicate non-verbally. Even though all animals can be used in AAT, horses in particular lend themselves extremely well to a coaching or therapeutic setting because they are prey animals, unlike dogs or cats. They are highly sensitive to their surroundings and nonverbal communication, and are known to pick up a person's mood and internal state of feeling which they will reflect. Combined with their physical strength and powerful appearance, they can send impressive messages. (Latella & Abrams, 2015)

When animals mirror humans, this can lead to both fun and confronting experiences. They allow us to observe what is hidden under the surface. (Kintaert, 2020b) Thanks to the detour animals provide, humour can often be used to soften a situation. Since

the client is not directly addressed, they are less likely to feel attacked and laughing can help diffuse the tension. (Kintaert, 2020)

2.3.3 Social capital

As pointed out before, humans are social creatures. Even when animals can form a valuable substitute for human/human relationships, people are always part of their surroundings and dependent on the decisions and actions of others. It is the job of the social worker to empower the individual while strengthening their social network and aiming for social justice in their environment. (De Mönninck, 2016)

Animals do not only have a positive effect on a person's well-being, but can also assist in expanding one's network, also called social capital – referring to the networks of relationships in a particular society, focusing on social, economic and physical well-being. Animals in general and dogs in particular, show to be great catalysts for social capital by promoting interaction and establishing trust between strangers, in so countering anonymity. Studies show that in neighbourhoods in which a lot of people walk their dogs, the people do not necessarily know one another by name, yet rather like the owner of this or that dog. Nonetheless, the social fabric in these neighbourhoods is denser compared to similar areas with less dogs. (Arkow, 2015)

Although giving every person a dog is not an option to be pursued considering animal welfare, the concepts concerning social capital can be useful when working with groups. In the group method, peers facing similar difficulties are brought together to form an artificial group focusing on mutual support, thus classifying it as a systemic method as well. The group becomes a safe space in which one can practice their social and societal skills. The method often focuses on emancipation, a process in which one starts in a negatively experienced situation and aims at better circumstances. (De Mönninck, 2016)

By introducing animals into the group method, the tension is relieved and the focus is redirected. When an animal is accepted the way it is, it becomes easier for the client to believe they will be accepted as well in a safe space where prejudices are left behind. Not only is a youngster welcomed in the group, they also play a vital part. If no one cares for the animals, they cannot survive. Caring for another enhances self-worth.

Furthermore, the client can experiment in this safe zone with non-verbal communication and learn acceptable social interactions with both animals and peers by modelling. Feedback is part of this learning process, rejection is not. Additionally, the adolescent learns to be empathic and patient, first towards the animals, next a transfer to their peers can be established. Finally, the client should be encouraged to help in the decision-making progress concerning the treatment of the animals, contrary to the attitude of helplessness which can be adopted when decisions about their own life are made without consulting them. (Kintaert, 2020)

When the animal's well-being is the focal point of the group, the classic dichotomy between caregiver and caretaker is eliminated. Instead, a team is formed in which the human members must be able to trust in and support one another, which invokes a different type of dialogue. This way of working leans towards the liminality attitude as mentioned earlier. Even in this small setting, it becomes clear that an animal can form a steppingstone to extended social capital. (Kintaert, 2020b)

When working with a group of peers, one's development is no longer an individual process for which the client bears the sole responsibility, instead it becomes a group effort, given shape by both humans and animals. In this growth process, calm confidence and inner strength are actively pursued to help every individual flourish, combined with respectful and clear communication. (Kintaert, 2020b)



Illustration 8 | Emma learns to trust people again.

3 How do animals fit into practice?

As stated in the introduction, I do not believe it wise to provide every child with a bunny at the age of six. It is important to be realistic when it comes to animal welfare and to admit not everyone is willing, or the circumstances do not allow to take proper care of an animal. However, this does not mean that animals cannot find their way in the lives of children and adolescents. In this part I want to briefly bring forward three projects in increasing levels of commitment, showing that enthusiasm can be a determining factor to bring animals into the lives of youngsters.

With all the benefits related to animals, I believe it important that social workers advocate for policy changes to support passionate people within their own organisation who are eager to introduce animals into their own workspace, even if that does not include themselves.

3.1 Example 1 | Having a pet at school

In a small primary school in the village of Oplinter near Tienen, a passionate teacher started a project with pigeons in 2010. He realised a dovecot where all children of the 5th and 6th year have their own bird. Every free moment, they are allowed to visit and take care of it. The pupils of the 6th year have learnt everything there is to know in the previous year and become the tutors of the new caregivers. In this way, the pupils hone their social and leadership skills, while learning to have respect for the animals, used materials and nature. They also learn a lot about responsibility and engagement, since the animals need to be taken care off during the weekends and school holidays as well. Additionally, pupils reported a higher motivation to come to school because of the presence of the birds. Even when a child did not score high on classic topics, they could still have a lot of fun with the animals. The cherry on top is the ease in which the pigeons can be introduced in other classes, such as mathematics – the amount of food that is required –, geography – the distance pigeons can fly -, or religion – a soft introduction to death and an eventual afterlife when a pigeon deceases. This entire project was made possible because one person believed in it and was capable of pulling others along in his enthusiasm, to that extent it is still in use today. (Saey, 2018)

3.2 Example 2 | Having a trained animal in a youth facility

Labrador Sam works for youth facility Emmaüs in Antwerp since 2022. Every day, Sam joins his handler to work and supports vulnerable youngsters and colleagues. Both have had an intensive and expensive training – two years for Sam after a thorough selection process and half a year for his handler –, as well as two other handlers in the facility. The dog brings peace when humans fail to provide it. Not only the adolescents are enthusiastic about Sam's presence – they are less prone to negative feelings and trauma related behaviour such as auto mutilation and dissociation –, his positive impact has also been noted by juvenile judges, youth lawyers, police officers, psychiatrists and psychologists. In addition, Sam proves to be an excellent mirror because his behaviour is less controlled than that of a caregiver. When a client or a parent yells, he will be startled unlike a trained human caregiver. This helps them to reflect and develop. However, Sam's presence also challenges his handlers. They need to be constantly aware of his needs on top of the normal caseload. Some members of the team are afraid of Sam, or allergic to him, which they have to respect and take into consideration by keeping him close. Despite the extra commitment Sam requires of his handlers, they believe in the value of his presence and the positive impact he has on vulnerable youngsters and their families. (Develtere, 2023)

3.3 Example 3 | Having a wide array of animals in a green environment

At the farm of LEJO vzw in Brasschaat near Antwerp, adolescents who struggle to go to school are welcome to find peace and grow their resilience in a green setting. The calmness is disrupted by the occasional bark of a dog, the braying of a donkey or the grunting of a pig, while horses, goats, chickens and bunnies all go on their merry way. Adolescents are welcome here to work individually with a coach or in group, whatever suits their trajectory at that moment. At the core of this project are four values, equally important to staff, clients and animals: tranquillity, safety, equality and agency.

I had the opportunity to do an internship during the spring of 2023 in this enchanting setting, which is the result of the drive and vision of a couple of employees within LEJO vzw. I went into dialogue with adolescents and colleagues about what this place means to them and how its benefits could ripple through the social work landscape.

In dialogue with experts by experience

Simultaneously with writing this thesis, I had the opportunity to undertake an internship at the farm of LEJO vzw in the forests of Brasschaat near Antwerp. To not only witness but also experience the theory I had been reading about to compile the literature study, was eye-opening and has further strengthened my belief that animals can have great potential in the trajectory of vulnerable or at-risk adolescents.

First, LEJO vzw as a whole will be positioned in the youth and education landscape by focusing on its mission and vision. In the next part, I will zoom in at the farm and the four core values that serve as a guideline for every thought and action to paint a picture of this extraordinary setting. Finally, I will do my utmost best to make the magic that takes place on a daily basis on the farm tangible, based on the input of adolescents, colleagues and my own experience.

1 Mission and vision of LEJO vzw

LEJO vzw is an organisation aiming at the emancipation of youngsters, with emphasis on those in situations of social vulnerability. To empower them and have a sustainable social impact, LEJO vzw focuses on a dual track. First, youngsters are encouraged to grow stronger in society by providing them with both mental and physical space to be themselves, offering a listening ear, and giving them the opportunity and guidance to take on responsibilities. Second, LEJO vzw stimulates civil society institutions, governments and policymakers to grow stronger in creating and giving opportunities to these youngsters, thus creating structural changes. (*LEJO's Jaarverslag 2022, 2023*)

LEJO has different teams consisting of over fifty colleagues, spread over the provinces West-Flanders, East-Flanders and Antwerp focusing on training, leisure activities, youth work, teenage parents and education. All of these teams are imbued with the methods of learning by experience – hence the name LEJO, which stands for *Leren door Ervaringen voor Jongeren* or Learning through Experiences for Youngsters. (*LEJO Jaarverslag 2022, 2023*) This method excites personal growth and development for everyone involved in the process by believing in the strength of experience. To

reach a goal, youngsters are challenged to explore solutions and strategies by themselves, individually or in group. By reflecting both during and afterwards the experience, active and deliberate learning can take place. The acquired skills can be transferred to new situations. By using this method, LEJO vzw aims to increase and strengthen adolescents' independence and self-confidence. (*Ervaringsleren, 2021*)

2 Core values at the farm

At the farm in Brasschaat, learning by experience is made possible in a setting that is entirely new for many. Taking care of the animals in the pastures surrounded by nature or tinkering at the barn filled to the brim with possible projects, the pressure of school and society is miles away. Adolescents who cannot make it to school – either parttime or fulltime – are welcome to work on their motivation and resilience in an individual and group trajectory afterwards, depending on their needs. The coaches at the farm are part of a broader network, including parents, school – both teachers, internal and external school counsellors –, and, depending on the context, psychologists, psychiatrists, residential facilities, juvenile court, etc.

To ensure everybody can grow and develop at their own pace and according to their own capabilities, four core values were compiled to act as a framework. These can be consulted at the kitchen where everybody comes together for lunch or a chat. By respecting these values, the welfare of caretakers, caregivers and animals is at the heart of every undertaking.

2.1 Value 1 | Tranquillity

Inner peace is considered a prerequisite to have room for learning and growth. In order to obtain this, it helps to reside in a peaceful surrounding. By focusing on three elements, this value is pursued: (1) visual rest – which is achievable since the farm is located in a forest, (2) oversight and structure – by working with a timeline for individual trajectories and having a routine in the group, and (3) calm and respectful interactions with the animals – in which pressure of any kind is a no-go.

2.2 Value 2 | Safety

Both the physical and mental safety and integrity of everyone present is of the utmost importance. To guarantee this objective, there are four aspects that must be taken into account: (1) by keeping the number of youngsters small, closeness between everyone involved can be guaranteed, (2) a policy of non-violence and a conscious handling of personal boundaries is strictly adhered to – which includes respect for everyone’s pace and possibilities, (3) careful and conscious use of tools and materials – time is made to learn how to use these correctly, and (4) conscious treatment of the animals – with respect for the animals and their choice to engage in activities.

2.3 Value 3 | Equality

At the farm, everybody is different in role, yet equal in worth. Communication is open and transparent towards one another and everybody shares responsibility in matters of respect and care. In every conversation, whether it concerns a one on one coaching or multiple partners are present, everybody is addressed with a focus on equality.

2.4 Value 4 | Agency

Every client is invited to share his opinions concerning activities, and encouraged to take initiative and determine the course of action. In individual trajectories, youngsters are co-responsible for achieving or correcting their goals, timeline, etc. since nobody knows them better than they do themselves. Agency is actively stimulated at the farm in order to make a sustainable transfer to other areas of life.

3 Experiences at the farm

In line with the vision at the farm considering how tough topics can be broached more easily while being busy doing something light-hearted, I made the conscious decision not to formally interview youngsters or colleagues. Instead, I talked to them during mundane activities at the farm – such as walking through the forest accompanied by the donkeys, brushing the horses until their coat shines in the afternoon sun or weeding the vegetable garden so we can cook and enjoy healthy lunches. I had mentioned to everyone what my thesis was about, yet because the animals are such an important

part of the coaching trajectory of many, I seldom had to steer the conversation that way although I sometimes did enquire further with my thesis in mind – although I often thought their insights so interesting I would also have asked more questions simply because I am so curious about this topic.

Hence, the following part is a patchwork based on a numerous amount of informal conversations, experiences and observations during the spring of 2023, trying to capture why the farm of LEJO vzw is a place to grow resilience and empower oneself for many adolescents. One of them broke it down by stating the farm has such a positive impact because of three factors: its location in nature, the presence of the animals and the attitude of the coaches. All three separately would be beneficial in a trajectory, but it is the symbiosis that unlocks a powerful context in which growth is possible.

3.1 Factor 1 | Located in nature

The LEJO farm is located on a ten minute walk from the main road through the forest on a dirt track. The remoteness helps to filter the general hustle and occupations from the everyday world and contributes to achieve the intended tranquillity, while the walk itself helps youngsters – sometimes accompanied by parents, school counsellors, etc. – to get into a peaceful and balanced mindset. In this short walk the biophilia theory shows its strength, by helping people relax simply by being submerged into nature.

The former forest ranger's residence has been occupied by LEJO vzw for a decade. Before this permanent basis, a couple of employees working in the city centre of Antwerp was convinced that taking the youngsters out of the city and into nature would be beneficial. So they set out on day trips, took care of horses owned by friends or went gardening. Upon seeing the positive impact this had on the youngsters, they made the decision to look for a place where they could reside to make their work more sustainable. And they happened to find the perfect fit in Brasschaat.

All youngsters told me the location gives them time and space to be themselves. For some this feeling came upon their first arrival, for others it took up to half a year. But all shared the feeling of belonging, where they are allowed to be both happy on good days and sad on the bad ones. They do not feel the necessity to keep up a good front

under the pressure of society, it is plenty to be in the moment and take that feeling as a basis for personal growth. Some described it to me as a place where they can learn and develop on their own pace and without judgement, yet with the assurance of someone standing beside them and guiding them whenever necessary. When I told them about the liminality theory as a phase outside of society in which a transformation takes place between being one form of yourself and another they affirmed promptly this was exactly what it felt like to them.

3.2 Factor 2 | Presence of animals

The youngsters all emphasized that the animals are a key element of the farm, even those who do not particularly seem particularly engaged with them. When talking about the animals, picture – from big to small in appearance – two horses, two donkeys, three goats, two dogs, three pigs, a dozen or so chickens and two bunnies. The animals are implemented in animal assisted social work, part of the cluster animal assisted therapy (AAT-SW), with their mere presence being the most important factor. Only the horses sometimes take up an active role of co-coaches when their body language is used as a mirror for active reflection. However, since the role of LEJO vzw is to coach adolescents to empower them to return to school and not to provide therapy as such, none of its employees are schooled therapists. Even on the seemingly basic level of AAT-SW, the animals at LEJO vzw provide a mayor difference in the trajectory of the youngsters. I believe this to be an important take away for those who are hesitant to incorporate animals into their own work because they are not trained therapists. With proper caution considering safety and well-being of both animal and client, the mere presence of an animal can have positive effects. I happened to have a conversation about my thesis with one of the colleagues from another branch who is a big fan of what happens at the farm and who happens to welcome a puppy in his family soon. He told me he had not thought just bringing his dog to work from time to time could make an impact but would consider looking into the options after being informed of the potential benefits.

For starters, animals heighten motivation. For some the prospect of having time to train or cuddle with them provides extra motivation to come to the farm. Others admitted

that they cared so much for the well-being of the animals, they like to be around to make sure they are properly looked after and their needs are met. When an animal is injured or needs extra care, someone who takes up extra responsibility to help out is easy to be found among the worried youngsters. This may seem like a trivial thing, yet is anything but. Knowing some of them have not been to school in two years or otherwise have a very tough time to make it to school on the days they do not come to the farm because they feel so overwhelmed or completely lack motivation, this little spark of actually wanting to do something cannot be underestimated.

Often, these youngsters have a lot on their mind and find it hard to stop mulling. Some of them find outlets for their thoughts in auto mutilation or compulsive eating habits. The animals allow them to clear their head. One of my colleagues invited me to do an exercise he regularly does with new youngsters to feel the effect for myself. While he was holding a horse on a lead rope, I had to observe it four times, each time using only one of my senses – excluding tasting for obvious reasons. Even though I have been around horses a lot, I still felt, saw, heard and smelt things that had gone unnoticed before. By being so intent on my senses, I completely got out of my head and felt more calm and connected with myself and my surroundings than I had ten minutes before. While being engaged with the animals, the youngsters feel both secure and distracted enough to talk about what occupies their thoughts. Combined with the fact that they are on the farm for half a day or a full day, they told me they do not feel the pressure they do in a therapist's office. There is no expectation to sit still on a chair and talk for exactly one hour, but instead they are invited to participate in the everyday activities at the farm and talk whenever they feel like it during the day. By allowing this liberty, they do not feel forced and are more prone to open up about themselves. To me, this is a telling example of the merits of working in diluted severity.

Not only is it easier to talk about what they are concerned about, the animals also prove to be a great conversation starter between participants. Where they would despise to talk to peers in a jolly forced environment, conversation flows natural when discussing the care for the animals – ranging from practical topics as to who is to feed what animal to shared musings about which animal is the cutest. The safe practice of social skills in this setting, are invaluable outside of the farm as well.

One of the youngsters pointed out he learns a lot from the animal's body language as well. For example, when the horses are tired of being cuddled they simply walk away. In doing so, they clearly indicate their boundaries and are true to their own needs. Since there is no drama involved because of bottled up emotions, nobody has to feel hurt. Before this moment, he often kept his emotions to himself and allowed others to surpass his limits since he was not aware of them, which inevitably ended up in emotional explosions. By learning how to set his boundaries and calmly maintain them, he was able to be a more constructive partner in all sorts of dialogues and settings. He told me that in that moment, the horses held up a mirror to him no human could have. The final and most powerful idea I was told, was that in taking care of the animals, the youngsters felt like they were also taking care of themselves. One of the youngsters solemnly and without a hint of irony described that the transformations taking place at the farm feel like magic to him and the others nodded in unison. I felt indescribable grateful to be a witness of a small part of their journey.

3.3 Factor 3 | Attitude of the coaches

As mentioned before, the farm started out as a passion project from some of the LEJO vzw colleagues who were convinced nature and animals could have a positive impact on vulnerable and at-risk youngsters. Moreover, they did not have to convince me that the connection with youngsters comes more easily when you can share something you are truly and authentically enthusiastic about. In my previous job as a teacher, I have learned adolescents have developed a sixth sense for fakery but are lenient when someone is genuinely excited – even when they have little care for the topic themselves.

In accordance with the attachment theory and the effect of animals on it, everyone present at the farm affirmed the theory sounded reasonable. One of the youngsters told me that it is easier to trust and connect with someone who shows care for and takes responsibility of an animal. Especially if the coach shows kindness and patience, even when the animal does not act as expected or required.

The absence of a hierarchy and therefore a power structure, benefits the connection as well. At LEJO vzw everyone has a different role, yet is equal in value. The coaches

are responsible for the general structure, but the activities during the day are to be decided by the present participants. Because everybody has a say and does not have to do something he or she does not want to do, there is no power dynamic at play to which a lot of youngsters have developed resistance. This does not mean that youngsters get to sit around and do nothing. They are actively encouraged to take up certain responsibilities even if this means doing something less enjoyable, such as mucking out the goat stable.

Above all, the coaches are responsible for the well-being of everyone involved. The youngsters really appreciate that the animals are treated with respect and are not just seen as tools. For the youngsters this sometimes means they cannot partake in the group sessions but would benefit more from individual coaching sessions. Even when in group, there is always room for the individual and signals of distress are picked up and handled with serenity. No matter the activity – whether it is feeding the animals or preparing a roundtable discussion concerning the trajectory of a youngster –, everyone always gets to share their ideas which are honoured to the extent possible, but in matters of safety and well-being it is the coach who has a final say.



Illustration 9 | Emma at the gates of the LEJO farm.

Recommendations

Based on a SWOT analysis, I would like to formulate three recommendations on the implementation of animals in youth work to answer the question: *If and how should AAT be more widely implemented in the trajectories of vulnerable adolescents?*

1 Be an open-minded and realistic advocate

If you are passionate about animals, dare to dive into evidence-based literature and practices to learn where the ethical possibilities lie within your framework. In the knowledge that AAT-SW can have a great beneficial impact on the well-being of youngsters, without the additional certifications and obligations of AAT-Psychotherapy, there might as well be an opening to introduce something as seemingly simple as a fish tank or to get the approval to follow a training with your own suitable dog, imbedding animals more widely in youth work. If you are not a fan of animals yourself, this does not have to exclude you from being supportive in this endeavour. Quite the contrary, a critical viewpoint to temper the enthusiasm might as well be needed to create a realistic and successful narrative.

2 Establish attainable expectations

Animals are not a panacea to erase all difficulties. However, they show great potential to be complementary to traditional approaches and can demonstrate their worth in reaching youngsters who are tired of the care system and everyone who represents it. They can manage to establish trust between caregiver and caretaker, and increase motivation while decreasing stress and in so contributing to a general improvement of one's well-being. Yet ultimately, while an animal can be a catalysator in a holistic and individual approach, change has to come from the clients themselves. And it is important to note that, just as not all colleagues like animals, not all youngsters will non either.

3 Create a safe context

Introducing an animal is an exciting occasion. In order to make it a fruitful effort, it is of the utmost importance that a clear set of rules are in place and upheld at all times to ensure the safety and well-being of both animals and humans. These rules can be boiled down to a calm demeanour in the presence of the animals – in which abrupt movements and shouting are off limits – and respect at the core of every action. Besides this set of rules, the handler has to be aware of the capabilities and training of their animal. Finally, this context should be free of judgement and pressure, allowing time and space to learn, explore and be oneself.

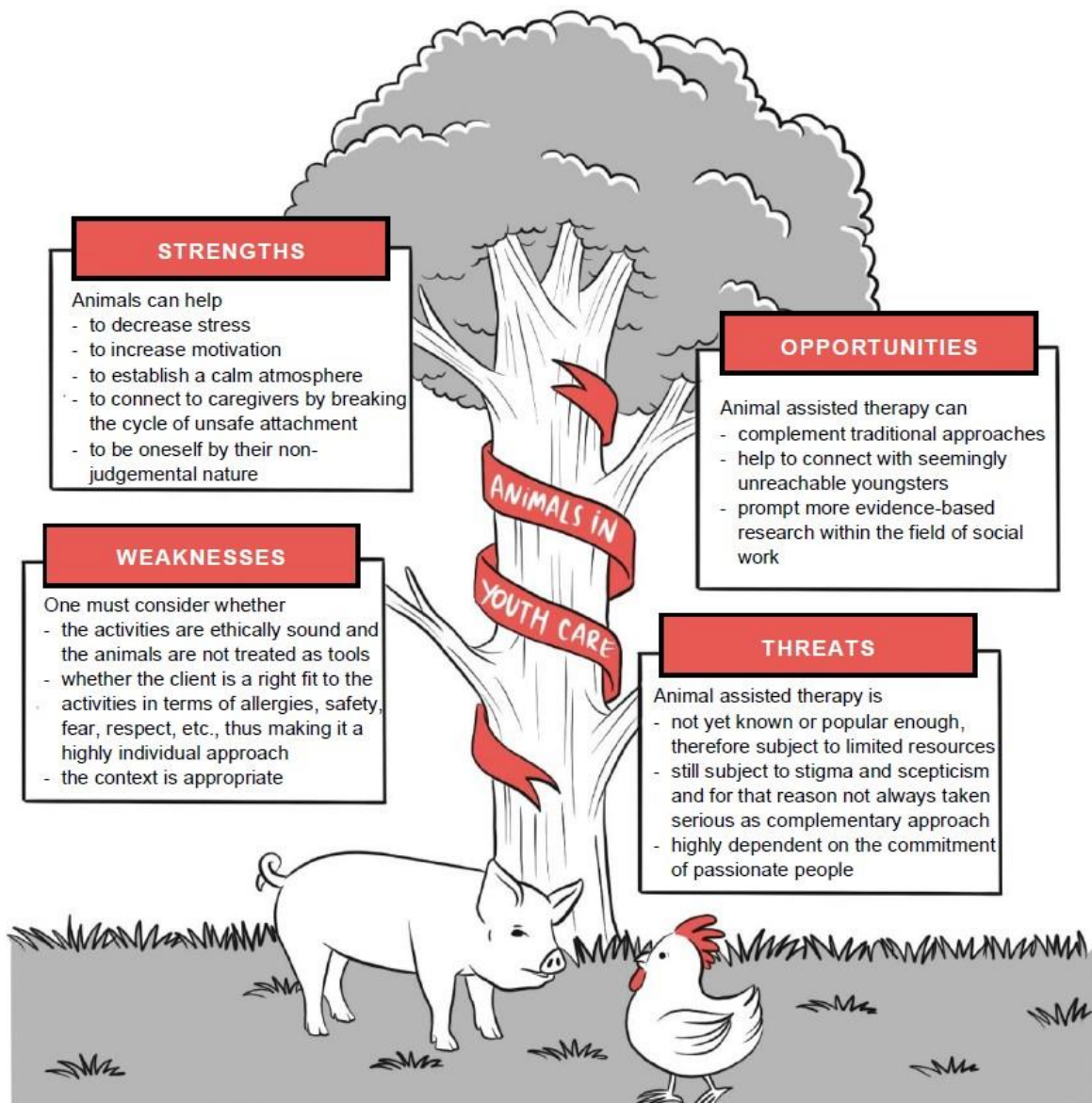


Illustration 10 | Schematic representation of the SWOT analysis considering animals in youth care.

Conclusion

Research objectives answered

To answer whether there are legitimate reasons to include animal assisted therapy (AAT) in a youth work context concerning vulnerable or at-risk adolescents, I can only formulate a positive response.

As demonstrated, animals can be implemented as co-coaches or instruments into the existing definition of social work by a slight shift in perspective. They can help those who struggle to function in school or society to realize their human right to education by empowering them and strengthening their resilience. Complementary to traditional frameworks, AAT can rely on alternative and indigenous approaches.

Animals can be implemented in various ways, with AAT-SW being quite approachable since the animals are simply part of the setting and there is little need for training and certification – although ethics and safety should always be taken into account. By their presence, animals can help youngsters to strengthen their well-being, increase their motivation and decrease their stress-levels. In relation to their social context, they can form a bridge between caregiver and caretaker enabling healthy attachment patterns – which might be a final method to connect with some youngsters who have had their fill of the care system –, function as a mirror for behaviour and thought processes, and grow someone's social capital since their needs are a thankful topic of conversation.

From pigeons at school, over a trained and certified service dog in a youth facility, to a farm filled to the brim with animals of various kinds, the level in which AAT is realized is highly dependent on the context. If enough passionate people are committed to this type of project, the potential merit is immense.

However, as illustrated in the part concerning the farm of LEJO vzw, animals alone do not cut it. The context and attitude of the social workers are vital elements as well for the success of any trajectory.

As a result of research and experience, a SWOT analysis was formulated from which three recommendations resulted to implement AAT-SW into a social work setting: (1) be an open-minded and realistic advocate, (2) establish attainable expectations, and (3) create a safe context.

Implications on social work

Research backs the idea that implementing animals in social work has so much more value than simply being cuddly and cute. To get in touch with unreachable and highly resistant youngsters – who otherwise would find it extremely hard to work on their resilience and claim their place in society – by introducing an animal, shows great potential that has yet to be unlocked further.

Knowing that just by their presence animals can provide a plethora of benefits – even without expensive and extensive therapeutic training and certification – might convince passionate social workers to raise the idea in their organisation and have a positive impact on the adolescents in their care. More practices could also prompt more research within the field of social work.

By incorporating animals to stimulate the well-being of youngsters, social work also makes a statement to other areas involved with health and happiness. It signals that our society at large should embrace the benefits nature offers us, and in turn society should take care of nature with a heightened focus on durability and climate awareness. This is a perspective all would benefit from, since climate justice equals social justice.

Conclusion statement

Animals can have a significant and positive impact on the care trajectory of vulnerable youngsters who feel lost and threaten to leave school without a degree, with all its dire consequences and costs. The benefits animals can have on them by simple being present are plenty, both on their individual well-being and resilience, and on their social context. When adolescents find themselves in a dark place with no regard for the help offered by school counsellors or other social workers, animals can have the ability to shed a warm light of compassion and courage. The way I see it, that is nothing short of magic.



Illustration 11 | Emma has conquered her challenges and feels ready to take the next step on her journey.

Further reading

For anyone interested in the topic, the following publications are a great place to start.

Fine, A. H. (2015). *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Foundations and guidelines for animal-assisted interventions*, 4th ed. Elsevier.

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