

Water Planet's therapy with wild dolphins

By reading this document, you will hopefully get a better idea of what we do and of what dolphin therapy is and you will have the opportunity to adapt your expectations to a reasonable level. We have had our first autistic child in Panama City in 1997. A psychologist from Oxford brought us a 10 year old Japanese girl because she had read about the work of Betsy Smith and Horace Dobbs, who are the pioneers of dolphin assisted therapy. Mamiko did so well during the week she spent with us that we decided to design a special program for children with autism and/or other cognitive, emotional and mental developmental delays. We have found that the emotional impact of a wild dolphin encounter combined with sensory integration techniques like expressive arts, body work, music and play could be beneficial in promoting social behavior adaptation and improvement and stimulate cognitive abilities in children with developmental disorders and delays.

Mamiko came back to attend our Harmony Program a second time and since then, we have had many more families attend our Harmony and Serenity Programs.

I have personally been able to observe and follow the interactions of dozens of children with autism and other developmental delays with the local wild dolphin population in Panama City. I have tried to look at this interaction critically from the human point of view and also from the dolphins point of view.

Due to media distortion, and the "Flipper myth" entertained by Seaworld and other amusement parks and because of emotion-craved New Age adepts, dolphins by reputation have acquired qualities and powers that they actually may not have and probably do not care to have. Most dolphin assisted therapy sessions take place in a controlled environment with captive animals, who are trained to respond with appropriate behaviors (dorsal tow, jumps, accept a fish, tread water and vocalize, etc) as a reward for the performances of disabled children in a therapy session lead by a psychologist or other healthcare professional. The dolphins are cued by their trainer, who is acting on signs from the therapist whenever the child has satisfactorily reached a pre-determined goal. The child feels the pleasure of the reward and is motivated to keep achieving the goals set by the therapists. This is what "Dolphin Assisted Therapy" is in the traditional sense of the term.

After having observed wild dolphins behavior in contact with all types of human populations since 1995, I cannot say that wild dolphins pay more attention to disabled children than to any other children. In my opinion and at least in our area, a wild bottlenose dolphin's interest in humans is caused by several factors:

- curiosity and survival-based need to investigate whatever and whoever is in their habitat.
- Interest in receiving food. Since generations, it has been a tradition in the Panama City area to feed wild dolphins. Only a small percentage of the whole population (15 to 20 %) interacts with boats and swimmers on a regular basis. The habit is carried down generation after generation through the blood line on the mother's side. A female habituated to approaching humans will teach her calf the same behavior. We know several such individuals, with whom we interact on a regular basis.

It is this mixture of "family tradition", interest in hand-outs, curiosity and playfulness which makes it possible for us to be in close proximity to the wild dolphins of Panama City. I do not believe that the local wild dolphins are especially intrigued or otherwise attracted to children or adults with disabilities. I am sure that by using their sonar, they can become aware of a tumor or of a physical handicap in a human being, possibly of other disabilities. But as far as their showing a different behavior in the presence of a disabled person, I have not been able to observe that since I arrived in Panama City in 1995.

From the human point of view, I have seen many children and especially their parents, react positively even having life changing emotional experiences in contact with the wild dolphins in our area. Most humans react positively to animals, especially to dolphins because of their intelligence, curiosity and playfulness. In our opinion, humans have the ability to improve their health by maintaining a contact with nature. It is a fact that living without being in contact with plants and animals will slowly lead to abnormalities and diseases. In our opinion, the marine environment is most regenerating. The feeling of contentment and fulfillment experienced during our excursions on, in and under the water is then reinforced by several sensory integration techniques using different media like paint, music and bodywork, physical therapy, water shiatsu and acupressure. These techniques, combined with the human qualities and deep sense of compassion of our staff and with the group dynamics occurring during the program contribute in facilitating the healing process in the families visiting our program.

I would also like to make it very clear that no scientific research has yet proven that a contact with dolphins will improve the healing process in either physically, mentally or emotionally impaired children. At Water Planet, we do not claim to be able to change the course a child's disability and cannot give any guarantee that his/her condition will improve. We believe in the healing power of the children's attraction for nature and we will facilitate this process by giving them the opportunity to be in close contact with the marine environment. From this point of view, we believe that free ranging wild dolphins can capture the children's attention and imagination, stimulating their enthusiasm, self-expression and self esteem. Most of the families

visiting us go back home delighted with their experience and with the experience of their children. We are urging parents not to look for or expect a miracle cure. We believe that the dolphins do not approach disabled children with the intention of healing them but out of pure curiosity. If there is a healing process, it is rather a process of opening up to the existing healing power of nature. This healing power is within each and every one of us. All we can do is to create the right atmosphere and help the families with our guidance and experience.

Several research projects focus on the possible healing effects of the dolphin sonar but no conclusion has yet been reached that sonar in itself has anything to do with the improvement of illnesses or disabilities.

Following is a personal experience I would like to share. I feel that it illustrates very well what was said above.

"Though I had many incredibly beautiful moments swimming with wild dolphins for my own pleasure, my most rewarding experience with them was the day I accompanied in the water a little boy with severe developmental delays (his name was Rico) for an encounter with a group of dolphins that had approached the boat. Rico could not see with his eyes for he was blind but he told me that he was looking at the dolphins through my eyes. The expression of rapture on his face as I was narrating our encounter to him in real time was so touching that all of a sudden, I realized what the magic of dolphins really was."

Denis Richard
Water Planet - President
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