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Feeding the Spirit... One Paw at a Time!

by *Erin Carlucci, RN, CPT, CDP*

My son Chase suffered a brain tumor which not only caused decline to his fine and gross motor skills, but speech and vision as well. For days after his surgery we tried to have Chase look at us but he could only look to one side. While lost in thought and losing faith I could hear the sound of heavy panting mixed with tap shoes walking toward us. I turned to see what the mystery sound was and I was greeted by a beautiful golden retriever. His tail wagged as if to wave the white flag in surrender.

His owner explained that he was a therapy dog and asked if "Sarge" could say hello to my baby boy. "Of course" I said while wiping the tears from my eyes, "Of course." Sarge jumped onto Chase's bed as if to say, "I am here boy, you must play with me now!" Chase did not look so Sarge gently laid alongside Chase. I took Chase's hand and rubbed it onto Sarge's head; Sarge moaned empathetically. Chase began to move his head as Sarge crawled toward his face. Sarge then licked his face and Chase looked at him and smiled. My son was engaged. These two beautiful creatures from God connected and without words.

As a Nurse caring for those living with Dementia I observe this on a daily basis. Pet therapy makes a difference in the hearts and souls of others. If only for a moment, People Living With Dementia (PLWD) connect with sight, hearing, touch, and smell. The animal understands and conveys this through connecting on a level other than speech. Feelings of anxiety, depression, loneliness, boredom, and helplessness are reduced by this connection. An animal will not judge, question, or cause threat to the PLWD. Should anxiety or agitation surface, an animal is a wonderful distraction. Animals are always willing to do whatever it takes to make their person feel joy. They sense the feeling of tension and can sometimes detect a health issue as well.

After reviewing studies found on the U.S. National Library of medicine, the following was noted. Pet therapy can significantly reduce behavioral aggression. One study showed behavioral expressions increased after a pet therapy session ended. Three studies showed greater social behavior and interaction with pet therapy. One study showed an increased food intake noted with the introduction of an aquarium in a dining room.

Whether it be a child with brain trauma or an elder with cognitive decline, pet therapy has shown to be a non-invasive and therapeutic attempt in connecting, caring for, and treating one in a positive and loving manner.

We need to slow down and honor those we care for.

Take the time to see them and feed their spirit.

About the Author:

I am a wife and mother to four beautiful children. I became a nurse after my third child suffered a brain tumor. I knew then my journey in life had changed. With pediatrics being too close to home I found my joy in caring for Persons Living with Dementia. Still filled with memories of wanting healthcare staff to see my son and not his disease, I took the path of making that change for those in my care. My journey to change the culture in care... one person at a time, began.