

The Dog Days of Therapy

by C. Blair Skinner, LMFT

C. Blair Skinner is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist working in private practice in Broomfield. She and her Delta Certified Therapy Dog, Winnicott, specialize in working with young children and their families.

Animals have always been an important part of my life. My dogs have been the ones who listen without prejudice or judgment; love unconditionally, even if I'm not feeling loveable, and who kiss away tears when I bury my face in their fur. I have always intuitively known of this connection between humans and animals, but I studied it in more detail when I became a therapist and began working with young children. There is a good deal of research to indicate that stroking dogs can lower blood pressure, release serotonin, and have an overall calming effect on people. I specialize in working with young children who have experienced severe trauma and loss in their lives. Frequently these children are adopted, have experienced tragedy, or come from divorcing families; all come to heal the deep emotional wounds they have incurred.



I named my golden retriever Winnicott, after Donald Winnicott, who coined the phrase "good enough mother" and who talked about the concept of a "holding space" wherein healing could take place. Winnicott was certified as a therapy dog through Delta Society in 2003 when he was just 1½ years old. "Winnie" was an instant hit with children, families and colleagues. Over the years I have come to develop a great trust in Winnie's ability as a therapist—sometimes I joke that *I'm* the co-therapist! One of the first things you'll notice in my office is the "Winnie wall" consisting of over 30 framed drawings children have created of Winnie. Over the years I've expanded and Winnie now has his own "brag book" in the waiting room which holds previous drawings from the wall collection. I am proud of this wall—not only because of how connected children are with Winnie—but more because of the pride I see in their eyes when they show their parents or loved ones that their picture is *framed* and on the wall.

Since I began working with Winnie I have so many stories of therapeutic successes. Traumatized children typically have little to no power or control in their lives. So I often encourage kids to give Winnie a command before they give him a cookie. He listens; he responds. Winnie alerts me whenever one of our clients are in the waiting room and he's the first to greet them—making sure they know that they are just who he's been looking forward to seeing all day! Sometimes Winnie is a big part of the session, other times he curls up and naps during session. Children notice him sleeping and say "shhh, Winnie's sleeping!" We then talk about being aware of their surroundings and adjusting their behavior to match, nurturing and caring about him—things these children often struggle to do. So even when he is "just napping," he is an integral part of the work we do. Winnie invites children to care for and nurture him. And in witnessing my interactions with Winnie—"my baby"—they experience even another level of nurturing.

I believe that healing ultimately occurs not because of any strategy or technique, but through the therapeutic relationship, and the relationships within the systems supported by that therapeutic relationship. Work with Winnie has taught me that the relationship children and families have with Winnie can have a healing impact. There is therapeutic value in every interaction clients have with Winnie. I tell clients that they are getting two therapists rather than just one! As children and families have a new experience of being heard, understood and respected by both myself and by Winnie, they learn to trust their own insight, and intuition, and have a greater respect for their own experiences. ■

New Board Members

President

Wendy L. Leu, LMFT, LCSW, CSPT has been in private practice in Colorado since 2003. In addition, Wendy facilitates marriage workshops for the Colorado Healthy Marriage Project, leads divorce recovery groups, and consults with teachers and pastors in the city of Denver and surrounding communities. For the past seven years, Wendy has also served as a caregiver/companion/case manager for an elderly woman in Denver.

In her free time, Wendy enjoys traveling, baking, snowboarding, gardening, and spending time with family and friends. In particular, 2009 is a special year for her as she and her husband, Steve, look forward to the arrival of their first child at the end of April!

As President of CAMFT, Wendy looks forward to representing and partnering with the very talented and hardworking marriage and family therapists of Colorado.

President-Elect

Barbara Stratton, MA, LMFT is a seasoned marriage and family therapist and longtime active member of CAMFT, being in private practice for over 22 years in Colorado. Barbara has coupled her MFT practice with teaching, writing, volunteering and consulting, always finding a need for systems-thinking and a devotion to healthy families within organizations and communities.

"Grandma Barbara" is what four little people call her. With her family spread out over the globe, she and her husband spend their vacation time and money to travel to be with their kids and grandkids.

As your President-Elect, Barbara is entering a five-year commitment to maintain the strength of CAMFT as a strong voice within the mental health community, protect the MFT license and your right to practice marriage and family therapy in Colorado, and to assure the client community quality and integrity with Colorado MFTs.

Member-at-Large

Atsuko Okuzawa grew up in Japan. She came to the United States to pursue her Bachelor and Master's degrees at Colorado State University, completing these studies with an graduate degree in Marriage and Family Therapy. Atsuko currently works at Judi's House as a grief counselor. Her passion is to assist a diverse clientele in learning the tools to better manage their lives.

Student/Associate Rep

Janna McAllister is currently working at the Denver Family Therapy Center in the Adolescent Substance Abuse Program. She has completed all coursework at the Denver Family Institute and is close to graduating with a certificate in marriage and family therapy. Janna received an MSW from the University of Denver. She expresses that, "I've known since I was a young teenager that I wanted to be a family therapist." Janna is a strength based therapist that loves to collaborate with families to meet their goals. ■