



Photo courtesy of Island Dolphin Care

Beneath the Surface

Adding dolphins to your therapy wish list.

Five-year-old Jordan Greenfield was terrified. He refused to get out of the car. It got so bad his father, Avi, was ready to turn the car around and go back home. Deena Hoagland approached the father and asked if she could see Jordan for a moment. "Let me see what I can do," she said, as she led Jordan to the dock to see the dolphins at Island Dolphin Care where Hoagland is the director.

Jordan has returned every year for the last 10. "It was the right match for us," Avi says. "The next day we came back and Jordan didn't want to get out of the water. He fell in love with the dolphin. He's been going back. It gives him a lot of confidence in his step. It's the ultimate therapeutic vacation for an autistic child." These days, if you ask Jordan what he wants to do, he'll say 'Squirt,' 'dolphin' or 'Mariner's Harbor' where the Greenfields stay in Florida.

In 2007 Cheryl Guth decided to take her 6-year-old daughter Madison, a water and an animal enthusiast who has autism, to give dolphin therapy a try at Island Dolphin Care, a dolphin therapy program in Key Largo, Fla. "It was such a natural fit and so exceeded all my expectations. I've been there four times in a little over two years. She's at peace there and doesn't suffer from the anxiety. Yes, it is not a typical day at school. There are requests and demands. It is serious stuff in a loving way," says Guth.

Intelligent, playful, charming and nosy, dolphins have been known to rescue stranded swimmers and bring them to safety, and inspire the imagination of young and old. Families with children with special needs are now adding dolphin therapy on their therapy wish list.

Scientist John C. Lilly was one of the first to tap into the idea of dolphin therapy in the 1950s. Later, scientists Horace Dobbs and Betsy Smith introduced dolphins to people with severe depression and mental disorders, and Clinical Psychologist David Nathanson began treating children with Down syndrome and other disabilities with dolphin therapy in the 1980s and called it "dolphin assisted therapy." Many hotels, resorts and amusement parks, such as Sea World, are offering quick dolphin meet and greets, but Hoagland, a licensed clinical social worker, says that getting kissed by

By Vanessa Geneva Ahern

a dolphin at a resort should be considered a recreational activity, not a therapeutic one. "Island Dolphin Care is not a resort. We have trained professionals. This is all we do. The majority of resorts don't have staff trained to work with special needs children. They are lumping the kids with the general public. It's like taking your child to the zoo to see horses versus going to a therapy center that works with horses and children," says Hoagland.

Island Dolphin Care is a not-for-profit organization that offers dolphin therapy programs for children with special needs from March through November in a contained lagoon. The center has been in operation since 1997 and works with a maximum of eight families per week. Hoagland says more and more dolphin therapy programs that claim to "heal" children with disabilities are surfacing and promoting themselves on the internet. These misconceptions confuse parents and are not based in reality. "What we do is incorporate proven methods, and use these techniques in a playful manner in ways we know can work. So there is no magic here. It is not about dolphin echolocation. That's what separates us from those programs. This is why kids improve. It's because of the work we do with the child and the family, not just the dolphin," says Hoagland.

During the "Five Day Dolphin Time Outs" the child has one daily session with a dolphin, and a daily classroom session where the child works on reaching whatever goal the family has set for him. The classroom activities usually have a dolphin or marine theme. Island Dolphin Care also has an interactive marine science education program so the children and siblings can explore a Touch Tank filled with local marine life, and can even listen to dolphin sounds through a hydrophone. If a structured in-water session isn't right for a particular child, IDC may suggest a Natural Swim program where a child can spend his dolphin time swimming near a dolphin while a parent or caregiver holds him instead of one-on-one with a therapist and dolphin trainer. The program can then be complemented with different services depending on family's goals. Additional activities and services include physical therapy, music therapy, massage therapy, assistive technology workshop, and a Sensory Integration seminar. (In addition to completing a lengthy application and questionnaire, families must send in a video of their child so that the team of therapists can get an idea of which classroom activities and exercises will work best for the child and family).

"For a child who is working with ABA we can do it in a very structured way. It really depends on the goal. We have a lot of assistive technology equipment as well. In the water sessions, we try to carry over whatever it is that we are working on," explains Hoagland. She has seen children that were non-verbal use some of the assisted technology that Dynavox offers to IDC.

Combining the love of water and animal interaction, dolphin assisted therapy can create an ideal relaxed learning environment. Cindy Mathena, Ph.D., OTR/L, dean of post professional studies at the University of St. August-



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Over the years, Richard has noticed that when parents are enthusiastic and open-minded, they impart their enthusiasm to the kids. As to what kind of child benefits the most from the facility's dolphin program, he says it depends. "It works out better when they are able to understand what's going on. Most kids with autism do. Most of the kids get in the water. It's rare to have a child that

doesn't want to get in the water, but it happens. We never force a child to go in.

They are very much aware of where the dolphins are even if they don't look them in the eye. You can say that they benefit the most, but in the end you don't know," says Richard.

Richard notes that several scientists have theories about the dolphin sonar and the impact of the sonar on the human body. He doesn't agree with computer scientist David Cole's theory about cavitation and bio-sonar, and how it has an impact on the cellular level and can influence creativity and promote the immune system. "People believe dolphins are magical beings. They are playful, intelligent, charismatic, and more glamorous than cats and dogs. We warn parents that there is no evidence in the effect of the sonar being helpful. Parents think that the sonar is going to be the triggering factor in the therapy. What we offer is the dolphin experience and we reinforce that with other activities. We believe that just putting them in the water with dolphins is not enough. We need to work with them on their emotions, social skills, and we prepare activities that take half the day," explains Richard.

Parents fill out an eight-page survey and the Water Planet staff can plan activities based on that. Richard says that the program can introduce colors, smells, massage, cranio-sacral therapy, and anything that is going to stimulate the senses. If parents are not interested in the full therapeutic experience and prefer to try the one-day dolphin program they can. Depending on the child's behavior, he can join the boat with other typical children, or the family can charter their own boat and go with Water Planet staff.

"Since there are no established standards, associations or government controls that establish the boundaries and determine what is and is not DAT, every facility does something different. Some of them offer other media as we do, others just use the dolphin," explains Richard. While families have reported benefits with both types of dolphin therapy, Hoagland points out that every program has a different spin on it so parents should do due diligence in interviewing prospective programs. Dolphin therapy programs purport to improve socialization adaptation, boost self-esteem, improve cognitive abilities by

complementing the dolphin time with other therapies, bolster confidence, and have a very positive and a joyous emotional impact for a child.

Roxanne Fanelli decided to take her daughter Antoinette to Water Planet after her aunt saw a television segment on DAT. Fanelli kept an open mind, thought it was worth a try and braved a maiden airplane trip for Antoinette (LaGuardia to Atlanta and then on to Panama City Beach). "We live in New York city, so just being in Panama City in a different atmosphere, was very relaxing for her," recalls Fanelli. Her daughter loved the music therapy and art class as well.

Although her daughter loved the water, Fanelli herself was petrified of the "unknown" the first time she went. "The interns were in the water with her. She would try to reach for the dolphins. She was a totally different girl there," says Fanelli. She adds that she did see benefits after Antoinette's first visit to Water Planet. "My daughter had issues eating her school lunch. She would never eat lunch at school, whether I packed it or it was school lunch. When we came back, she was more social, and she started eating her lunch at school." Years later Antoinette still remembers the name of the staff at Water Planet.

The second time Fanelli took her daughter to Water Planet she went in the water with Antoinette. "When we went the second time, I did go in the ocean, and with all the snorkeling gear and jacket. While I was swimming, a dolphin swam right next to me. We looked at each other and I felt as though the dolphin was telling me, 'don't worry, everything will be okay.' I had such an immediate calmness around me. It's so hard to explain," says Fanelli.

"In the case of Antoinette the progress can be very small, but very significant. Dolphin assisted therapy is like any kind of therapy. You need reinforcement on a regular basis. It's like massage on a stiff elbow. You need to relax the muscles around the elbow to fully relax," says Richard.

Families can practice this reinforcement by showing photos of the dolphin, reading books, watching videos, working with other types of animal therapy (hippo therapy for example), and, if possible, returning to the dolphin therapy program year after year.

Despite its popularity and family-reported benefits, dolphin assisted therapy is considered an alternative therapy and hasn't been officially recommended by any organization such as the American Veterinary Medical Association. "We are not aware of specific well-designed and controlled experiments that would conclude either way whether dolphin assisted therapy was safe or effective for people or in anyway harmful to the dolphins. As a science-based organization, the AVMA welcomes new science in the area," says Sharon Curtis Granskog, assistant director of media relations of the AVMA.

Dr. Mathena says that most of the research into dolphin therapy points to anecdotal observation as being the way to go. "Where you're going to see the benefits are the day-to-day family reports. It's a lot harder to quantify the benefits with the dolphins and the kids in particular, maybe more so than any other type of therapy because you're dealing with very unpredictable animals so measuring and quantifying is a little more

difficult. Benefits are anything from motivation to increasing communication to facilitating desire in therapeutic behaviors," says Dr. Mathena.

While dolphin therapy can be beneficial to many children with special needs, Hoagland notes that it is important to keep realistic expectations and that dolphin therapy isn't right for every child, which is why a reputable program will likely have an intense application process to determine that dolphin therapy is safe and appropriate for the child. For example, dolphin therapy would not be advisable for a child who hates the water, doesn't like the heat, doesn't like animals, has poor head control, or has difficulty swallowing. "I recommend it to anyone who can sort of think outside the box because a lot of people don't understand the interaction between dolphin and human. It's communication without words," says Guth who was pleasantly shocked that Madison, who had never donned a wetsuit before, had no anxiety the first time she was introduced to Squirt in the water. After a few days, she saw "beautiful bright sparkles" in her eyes." Guth says that after taking part in the dolphin therapy program, she noticed Madison had more eye contact, better color recognition and less anxiety in general. Although like many parents she wasn't expecting miracles and knows about the skeptics, Guth says "They made a believer out of me!"

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