



Youngsters at the skate park are among those involved in a new program aimed at teaching life skills through dog training. - PHOTO: JAMES WHITTAKER

Neglected dogs provide therapy for Cayman's youth

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A pilot program to teach youngsters life skills through dog training is under way in Cayman's schools.

The program is predominantly targeting at-risk youth and those with behavior problems or learning difficulties, but is also seen as an alternative career opportunity.

The youngsters will learn basic dog control skills as well as feeding, grooming, walking and even reading to the animals.

Research has shown that working closely with dogs can help teach young people important life skills, including empathy and responsibility, organizers say.

The pilot program is initially being held twice a week at George Town Primary School, the Lighthouse School and John Gray High School, using dogs from the Humane Society that have been trained by handlers.

Dog trainers Kenneth Morgan and Alberto Bryan Jr. have teamed up with Michael Myles, government's at-risk youth

coordinator and one of the founders of community group the Youth Anti-Crime Trust, to deliver the program.

Mr. Myles said research has shown that working with dogs helps young people with a variety of issues.

"Who doesn't love a dog?" he said.

"This type of program is becoming a worldwide phenomenon, where dogs are used in a variety of different ways, including as an alternative therapy for children," he added.

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He said it is also a career training opportunity for some youngsters.

Mr. Bryan, who runs House Guard Security firm, said he approached Mr. Myles with the idea after seeing the impact that working with his dogs had on a young man he had been mentoring.

He said the boy, who had been suspended from school, had shown dramatic improvement in his behavior at school since working with the dogs.

Mr. Bryan said he researched the issue and became certified as a pet therapy handler.

"We are teaching [the children] how to properly handle the dogs, how to care for them, to provide food and clean water, the importance of Heartgard and things like that.

"It helps to build self-esteem and confidence and teaches them responsibility," he said.

One of the more unusual aspects of the program involves the children reading to the dogs. Researchers say the activity has been proven to help reading skills, particularly with children who are intimidated by reading aloud to classmates.

The program, named Paws4Youth, is being funded through Youth ACT in the initial stages. Mr. Myles is looking for sponsors and estimates it will cost \$12,000 per year, per school, to keep the program going permanently.

He said the cost is mainly associated with housing and caring for the dogs, which will cycle through the program from the Humane Society until permanent homes are found for them.



Alberto Bryan Jr. introduces youngsters to dog training at the Cayman skate park. - PHOTO: JAMES WHITTAKER