

Youth & Animal Program



The Youth & Animal Program (YAP) is a groundbreaking rehabilitation program matching hard-to-adopt shelter dogs with young people in the justice system giving both a second chance.

What makes YAP unique is the way anger management counselling is combined with dog training. The teens attend the program four hours per week for the eleven-week cycle, working with two experienced youth counsellors and two qualified dog trainers. The dogs join the program in the second week when each youth is assigned a specific dog to train.

Each two-hour session consists of one hour of group counselling facilitated by youth counsellors and one hour of dog training led by the dog trainers with the counsellors present. The consistent participation of the counsellors allows for anger management skills discussed in group counselling to be practiced during the dog training portion. Similarly, situations that occur with the shelter dogs in training can be brought back to the group counselling sessions for discussion and elaboration. Working with the dogs demands patience, respect and positive communication. These skills are developed to provide the youth with alternate ways of dealing with conflict in their own lives.

The youth learn to use a form of operant conditioning called “clicker” training to teach the dogs basic obedience. No fear, force or physical manipulation is allowed. They also learn why fear, force and roughness are never appropriate ways to train any animal. Over and over, throughout the eleven-week program, they see when the training is done humanely without using force, there is positive and immediate feedback from the dogs. Experienced dog trainers work closely with the teens and dogs to ensure the correct dog behaviour is rewarded positively. The youth also learn how their own behaviour influences the dogs they work with and how their tone and body language affect the outcome of a message. Being able to consider another’s perspective is an important step in developing empathy, respect and social skills.



The program goals for the young people are to increase their ability to understand and manage anger and conflict, to increase their acceptance and empathy for others, and to recognize their inherent self-worth. The goals for the dogs are to increase their adoptability and to decrease adoption breakdown. The program provides an opportunity for success for both the youth and the dogs.

YAP is an intense, challenging program that:

- Demands a high degree of commitment from the young people
- Teaches responsibility and accountability for one’s actions
- Encourages empathy and respect for animals and people
- Provides opportunities for developing coping skills for both the youth and the dogs
- Provides an opportunity for success for the teens (training a dog for adoption)
- Provides an experience of being loved and needed for both the youth and the dog

One of the most important outcomes of this program is the recognition of hope.

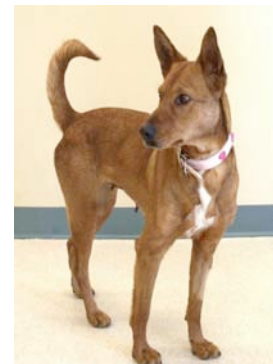


Most of the shelter dogs in YAP did not have the best start in life. Many were abandoned, some abused - all of them challenging candidates for adoption. Some of the dogs are bouncy, jumpy and out-of-control while others are fearful and unsure of life in general. The youth relate to the circumstances of the dogs, drawing parallels to their own lives. The youth understand their hard work and commitment offer the dogs real hope of finding a permanent home. They also learn first hand that rehabilitation is possible.

Through the dog training, the youth experience being in a position of power and authority that is positive, non-abusive and non-coercive. The dog training increases the youth's motivation to attend the program. They value the opportunity to give something back to the community in the form of the dogs finding new homes. Through the collaboration of group counselling and dog training, the youth learn to take risks, to connect and establish intimacy, and then to let go. The participants realize that, while letting go generates feelings of sadness, they can move past the sadness and be all right.

The youth have demonstrated many of the following positive outcomes after graduating from the program:

- ◆ Increased ability to regulate affect and control anger
- ◆ Reduced levels of violence or antisocial behaviour
- ◆ Reduced recidivism, or reduction in the amount or seriousness of offences
- ◆ Improved coping and problem-solving skills
- ◆ Improved cognitive functioning
- ◆ Reduced minimization and cognitive distortions
- ◆ Improved social skills
- ◆ Improved relationships with family, friends and peers
- ◆ Development of empathy



YAP brings together four very different agencies: the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (OSPCA), Family Services York Region (formerly Family Life Centre), Youth Justice Services, and Central Toronto Youth Services. It is an excellent example of how organizations from various disciplines can collaborate and support each other towards a common purpose.

An evaluation of YAP conducted by Dr. Fred Mathews of Central Toronto Youth Services can be found in the "Youth and Animal Pilot Project (YAPP): Program Evaluation Final Report, published September 10, 2002

For further information, please contact the Youth Justice Intake Worker at Family Services York Region at 905-883-6572 or 1-888-820-9986 ext 252