

MUM SAYS Animal therapy boosted my withdrawn child's self-esteem

Learn how one Singapore boy overcame his low self-esteem and anger management issues with a pooch's help...

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"My son, Danny, is currently in [Primary 6](#) and studying at a [mainstream school](#). He is a cheeky and witty boy with a quiet humour. He [adores animals](#), especially [dogs](#) and cats. He is very creative and loves transform Lego figurines into cars and trucks...

Danny underwent [speech therapy](#) when he was around 4 years old because his pronunciation was unclear. Apparently, he had some tongue sensitivity issues but he has now overcome that.

[School](#) has always been tough for Danny, who is [dyslexic](#). In his early school years in, he found it hard to catch up academically. He also had [trouble socialising](#). On one hand, Danny is an [emotional and sensitive](#) boy who does not take well to criticism. He gets offended easily. On the other hand, he is also very straightforward when it comes to speaking his mind, so much so that it can offend some of his friends. Consequently, he's had trouble keeping friends.

"He gradually began to think that everyone was against him and it was getting more and more difficult to steer him away from the negativity."

His [confidence](#) took a bad hit when he started failing his subjects in Primary 3. At one point, he had also been called names like "slow tortoise" when he was late in [handing up his work](#) because he has difficulty in reading and writing.

It was then that his [self-esteem](#) plummeted significantly, and this subsequently had a negative impact on [his social skills](#). He started to withdraw from his friends and preferred being alone during recess.

Danny soon started displaying further signs of resistance to school work and friends. Moreover, being promoted to Primary 5 added [more pressure](#) on him because of the greater load of homework and also the teachers having higher expectations since the [PSLE](#) is around the corner.

Because of his low [self-esteem](#), Danny's thoughts started to grow darker as well – for example, he started to use the word "hate" to describe negative feelings. If someone disapproved of his behaviour, for example, breaking a pen, he would think that the other person hated him rather than the act of breaking the pen itself.

He gradually began to think that everyone was against him and it was getting more and more difficult to steer him away from the negativity. To make things worse, Danny was losing a grip on [managing his anger](#). He would flare up at the slightest issue, throw [tantrums](#) and withdraw from everyone.



Our three children are aged 7, 11 and 16. Because of the [wide gap in their ages](#) and the [different personalities of each child](#), setting appropriate boundaries and finding effective ways of [disciplining each of them](#) is a challenge for my husband and me.

Danny and his younger sister, Jin, [do not often see eye-to-eye](#). [Sibling rivalry](#) often surfaces in our home, and my husband and I have to remind each other to remain impartial and not to make comparisons although this is extremely difficult.

Finally, we decided that it was time to seek help. We called several counselling centres and later chanced upon an animal-assisted therapy website, [Pawsibility](#).

It came across as an extremely interesting concept and I immediately had good vibes about sending Danny their way, because Danny is a dog lover. With a dog in the room, we felt that perhaps the counselling environment would be less stressful, as opposed to a conventional adult-child setting.

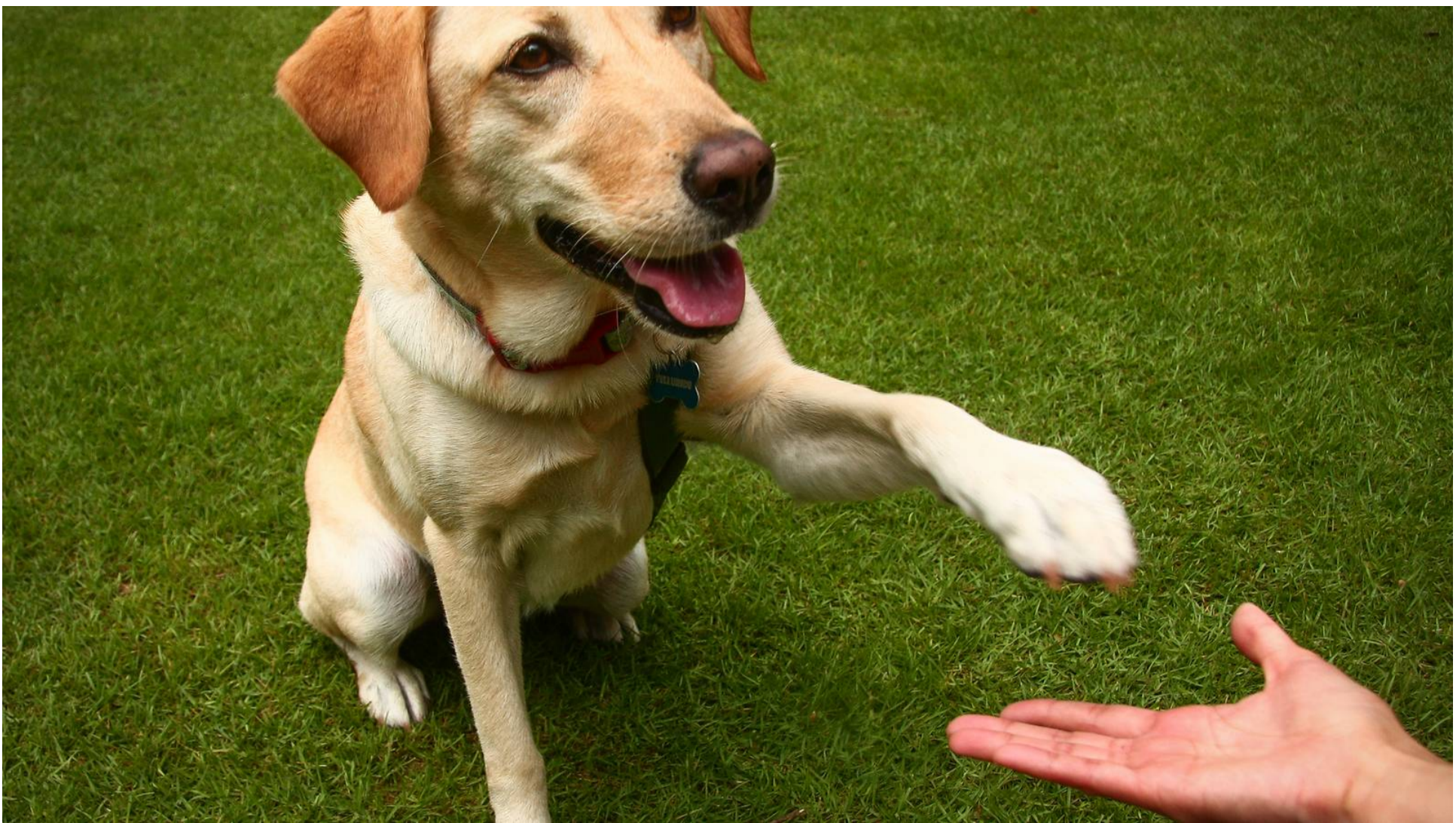
“With Telly around, Danny was less self-conscious and that certainly helped him to let his guard down and open up freely to Maureen.”

At his first session, Danny received a very warm welcome from the therapist, Maureen and Telly, the dog. That immediately brought all of Danny's walls down and it did not take long for him to warm up to Maureen and Telly. Indeed, with Telly around, Danny was less self-conscious and that certainly helped him to let his guard down and open up freely to Maureen.

As the sessions progressed, Maureen and I continually updated each other on his progress. At one point, Danny saw that Telly did not follow Maureen's instruction and he commented that Telly was a “bad dog”. Gradually, Maureen changed Danny's mindset and made him understand that not liking an action or idea is not the same as not liking a person or being bad.

Maureen related an incident to Danny of how Telly broke her items. Through this example, Maureen was able to demonstrate the difference between not liking Telly's action versus not liking Telly. Danny now understands that disliking an action and people are two different things.

Once, I told Maureen how Danny felt about people “hating” him. Maureen later discovered that Danny had the [misconception that people would hate him forever](#) when they looked upset with him. They then talked about other possibilities, such as, they did not like his actions, they were having a bad mood or they just had a grumpy face!



Danny also shared his feelings about being an underperformer in school because of his [dyslexia](#) and that he could not run properly, because he has flat feet. He wanted to win a medal at [sports](#) but was always the slowest runner.

Maureen told him how [everyone is different](#) and has different strengths and that it is absolutely all right to be different. She also helped him to identify his strengths. By and by, Danny was beginning to point out more of other people's strengths and he was becoming more positive in his thoughts. Today, he is also [a lot kinder](#) with his words and showers compliments on others more frequently.

On the home-front, Danny is now more accommodating towards Jin. We observe that he gives in to her requests (by letting her take the front passenger seat or the last cookie) and he shares more with her as well. Because there are now fewer disagreements between them, we are no longer the noisiest household in the neighbourhood!

"Through his animal-assisted therapy, he has learnt not to take things too seriously or personally."

Apart from [injecting positivity](#) in her chats with Danny, Maureen uses worksheets, colour charts, games, obstacle-course activities and breathing techniques to help him overcome his negative attitude and [anger management issues](#).

In the past, he was a [self-absorbed kid](#). He now learns to consider other people's feelings and interests before taking action. He is also kinder, which is displayed through acts like holding the lift for others, [saying 'thank you' and 'sorry'](#) more readily, pushing in the chairs after using them, and [helping with housework](#). He is doing these without prompting and it is a huge change from the old self-centered Danny. He also enjoys school more. He is [getting along with his friends](#) and understands that showing mutual respect is crucial in maintaining healthy relationships.

After his sessions with Maureen and Telly, Danny often comes home with a positive attitude and a calm demeanour. There are moments when we can see him exercise self-control over his emotions. At times, he chooses to walk away from a minor bad situation, instead of being [aggressive](#). Through his animal-assisted therapy, he has learnt not to take things too seriously or personally.

Ever since Danny met Telly, he has been [asking me for a pet dog](#). He misses Telly a great deal and talks about the dog every now and then. Maureen and Telly made a significant impact in his life — we are very blessed to have crossed paths with them."

Min, 44, is mum to Jin, 7, Danny, 11, and Kim, 16. You can find more information about Pawsibility [here](#).

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