

Guinea Pigs Help Children In Therapy Reconnect With The World

Child patients interact with and name guinea pigs to overcome life's obstacles.

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Photo Courtesy Imaginif

Stir and Fry, two female guinea pigs, will be receiving new names soon from child therapy patients at Imaginif in Cairns, Australia.

Stir and Fry. The names of these two guinea pigs conjure up the image of delicious Chinese cuisine but, as history has taught us, names are fleeting. Soon these two therapy pets at the Imaginif counseling services in Cairns, Australia, will be given new names by the child patients at the center.

"We work with some children who have been really hurt by adults," said Megan Bayliss, Imaginif's director. "Making a lasting choice is a skill that these children are still learning." She said the children don't trust easily and stopped forming attachments.

The children will submit names for the house guinea pigs when they visit the center for their weekly appointments. During the course of two weeks, Bayliss plans to allow the children to pick their favorite from the pool of names.

"To choose only one name to submit and to be in competition with other names is really scary to our kids," she said. "If the names put forward for the guinea pigs change from week to week, that's fine. We will work with that."

The children at the center are victims of abuse and sexual assault. The counselors, or talk doctors as they are called at Imaginif, use the guinea pigs throughout the span of the counseling sessions to help foster attachment and maximize the growth of empathy in the children, Bayliss said.

The idea to use guinea pigs for therapy spawned from a session the children had with a foster puppy the organization's psychologists brought in. Some children are scared of dogs, however, and one couldn't be kept at their facility, so the staff at Imaginif decided to go with a smaller, shyer animal – the guinea pigs.

By cuddling and holding the guinea pigs, the children with dissociative disorders can become grounded and learn to focus on what is happening with the guinea pig and, in turn, learn about themselves.

"By noticing how the guinea pig may be feeling, the child learns valuable skills about what their own body does when they are scared or stressed," Bayliss explained. "Similarly, the child can learn ways of self soothing and stilling their racing heart – all modeled through guinea pig body language."

Stir and Fry are kept on the front lawn of the center, so the children encounter the small animals when they first enter the facility. During the sessions, talk doctor Rebekah Allen supervises the interaction of the children with the guinea pigs. She monitors the time for "teachable moments" and offers therapeutic questions and suggestions to the children. As the center expands, Bayliss said the guinea pigs also will be used in the therapy rooms.

Imaginif also keeps bantams, a small variety of chicken, and was offered a miniature horse to use in therapy.

"We really wanted the miniature horse but caring for it would have caused us too many difficulties," Bayliff said.