



Introduction to
THE UNDERDOG PROJECT

ANIMAL ASSISTED INTERVENTIONS TO UPLIFT AT-RISK YOUTHS AND SHELTER DOGS.





The Underdog Project works with at-risk youth, using animal assisted interventions to help them overcome the social and emotional issues associated with early trauma.

We provide a safe and caring environment where supportive adult role models can teach positive interpersonal skills such as empathy, trust and personal accountability through the training of shelter dogs.

In so doing, our programme is mutually beneficial to two vulnerable groups, positively impacting the lives of at-risk youths whilst socialising and training shelter dogs to improve their chances of adoption.

THE UNDERDOG PROJECT IS A REGISTERED NPO AND PBO
NPO (099-954) AND PBO (930043275).

MISSION

Through our programme, at-risk youths participate in therapeutic workshops and learn to train shelter dogs using positive reinforcement training techniques.

Our mission is to help them overcome social and emotional problems, while teaching them valuable life skills in a safe and rewarding space. We believe that positive relationships between people and animals can help to promote a non-violent society, improve wellbeing and enrich lives.

MAIN OBJECTIVES

1. To assist at-risk teenagers and children to overcome social and emotional problems through Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) and/or Animal Assisted Activities (AAA).
2. To empower and teach young people valuable life skills through the training of rescue dogs.
3. To support animal shelters by helping rescue dogs develop behaviourally to improve their chances of adoption.

SECONDARY OBJECTIVES

1. Promote a non-violent society through teaching young people how to be kind to animals.
2. Partner with like-minded organisations in order to reach more youth and dogs who could benefit from humane education and Animal Assisted Activities or Animal Assisted Interventions.
3. Work in collaboration with other organisations to deliver humane education and life skills to people of all ages in all communities through Animal Assisted Activities or Animal Assisted Interventions.

We work with both Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) and Animal Assisted Activities (AAA).

AAI is 'the use of animals to assist people with social or emotional problems' whereas AAA is a more general approach of working in a variety of contexts connecting people with animals. Using AAI we help at-risk teenagers and children overcome the social and emotional issues associated with early trauma and/or challenging life circumstance. Using AAA we work with a broad range of children and teenagers from a wide variety of backgrounds, empowering them and improving their lives through life skills training and humane education, via the training of untrained shelter dogs.

VISION

Our vision is to promote a non-violent society in which children feel safe and connected to the world around them, living in mutual-respect and harmony with both people and animals.

OUR GOAL

Our goal is to work directly with 5 000 at-risk teenagers and children in various communities around the Western Cape by the year 2030, to create a ripple effect and spread awareness about non-violent behaviour, compassion and kindness to the vulnerable communities of South Africa.





BENEFITS
Exposes at-risk youths to trusting, supportive relationships.



BENEFITS
Provides a safe space for at-risk youths, with access to supportive adult role models.



BENEFITS

Prepares shelter dogs for adoption in loving homes.



OUR PROGRAMMES

Underdog Youth Builder

Our flagship programme provides life skills training and therapeutic animal interactions for at-risk youths. This is facilitated as weekly, two hour sessions with closed groups of between six and eight youths at our facility in Hout Bay.

Currently, we host groups at Hout Bay High School, Silikamva High School, Ottery Youth Care Centre, Brightstart and the Tenterden Positive Behaviour Outreach Programme.

Underdog Connector

Through this programme, regular weekly sessions are facilitated with past graduates of The Underdog Project who have chosen to stay on as ambassadors of animal kindness. Goal setting, career guidance and support, such as instruction in CV writing, are just some of the topics covered during these sessions.

The youths continue to work with shelter dogs as this positive interaction still serves as a form of non-invasive therapy, helping them develop better life skills and coping mechanisms.

Underdog Outreach

The outreach project allows The Underdog Project to work remotely in new communities through partnerships with other like-minded organisations, broadening the organisation's reach and impact.

This includes working in the De Doorns, alongside Sidewalk Specials and FourPaws, as well as partnering with Dassenberg Horse and Dog Rescue Centre in Atlantis to provide sessions for youths from Elsie's Rivier.

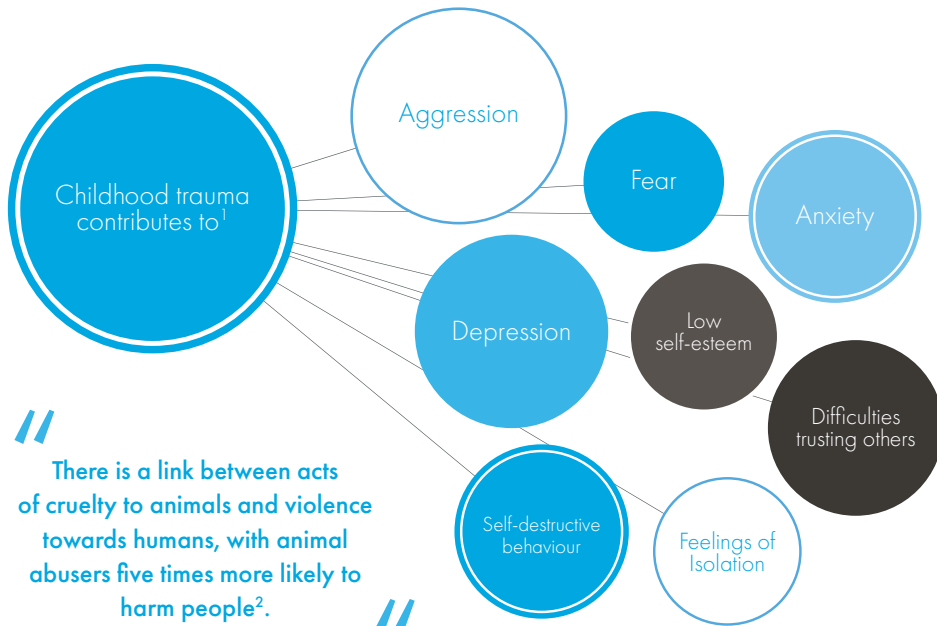
Recently, a partnership was secured with the Cape of Good Hope SPCA through which a programme will be run for youths in the surrounding Cape Flats communities.

Underdog Kids Club

We run monthly workshops with groups of children, teaching them how to care for and be kind to animals. We also facilitate positive animal interactions and activities in these workshops and organise animal related outings, visiting animal sanctuaries or shelters. We teach children to become Animal Kindness Ambassadors in their communities or schools, creating a ripple effect of kindness and personal responsibility.



THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA



40%

40% of young South Africans have experienced sexual, physical or emotional abuse or neglect.³

22%

22% of children in Cape Town meet the **diagnostic criteria** for post-traumatic stress disorder.⁴

¹ American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 5th ed, 2013.

² Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Northeastern University, Cruelty to animals and other crimes, 1997

³ Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention and University of Cape Town, The Optimus Study on Child Abuse, Violence and Neglect in South Africa, 2015

⁴ Cited in Cape Times, 10 October 2018, <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/22-of-children-in-cape-town-have-post-traumatic-stress-disorder-17424969>

⁵ Hamama L, et al. A preliminary study of group intervention along with basic canine training among traumatized teenagers: A 3-month longitudinal study. Children and Youth Services Review, 2011.



THE BENEFITS OF ANIMAL ASSISTED INTERVENTIONS

Animal assisted interventions



Lower anxiety and increase trust building.



Promotes release of endorphins which diminishes feelings of pain, depression and loneliness.



Reduce physiological stress responses such as elevated heart rate and blood pressure⁵.

ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2019

- We facilitated 1 600 animal and child interactions amounting to over 200 hours of one-on-one animal and child interactions.
- 141 youths participated in our programme.
- Over 100 sessions facilitated with groups of youths and children, an increase of over 100% from previous years.
- New partnerships formed with Sidewalk Specials, FourPaws, Cape of Good Hope SPCA, and Dassenberg Horse and Dog Rescue Centre.
- We employed a full-time lead facilitator who is a registered counsellor.
- We have facilitated the training of 29 dogs, over 50% of which have since been adopted into loving homes.
- Distributed 310 Kindness Care Packs to at-risk teenagers and children that we developed to support them during Covid-19 lockdown. These packs include a whole range of resources to support their mental health, provide them with information, masks and sanitiser to keep them safe as well as food parcels to keep them fed.

ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2020

- 40 youths participated in our programme
- 92 sessions facilitated with both groups and individuals of youths and shelter dogs
- Facilitated the training of 32 dogs, 24 of which have since been adopted into loving homes.
- Despite a year of immense impact on our fundraising efforts, due to covid, we survived the year and continued with operations as and when possible, which is testament to our resilience as an organisation.

2021 MONTHLY FUNDING REQUIREMENTS

Currently, through private and corporate donations, fundraising and services (holiday workshops, corporate team building etc.) The Underdog Project generates approximately R500 000 a year. However, this income is just sufficient to cover the initiative's basic costs and can be sporadic and unreliable.

The Underdog Project currently employs two full time members of staff, the Managing Director and the Lead Facilitator, who is a Registered Counsellor. R500 000 would allow for the retention of current staff members as well as covering operational costs in order to continue facilitating approximately 1 600 child and dog interactions in a year.

Further funding, of approximately R500 000, would enable the project to employ more staff, including an assistant facilitator and a project manager, in order to further the programme's reach and achieve the organisation's objective of directly reaching and working with 5 000 youths by 2030.

This will also allow us to increase our geographical spread, foster more partnerships and create a template that can be replicated nationally, or even internationally, to help thousands more at-risk youths.



CASE STUDIES

Talk with heart

One of the little boys on our programme is a selective mute, which means that, although he can speak, he doesn't because of the trauma associated with a lifetime of abuse and maltreatment by adults.

He was paired up with Charlie, a lively little dog who had never had any training. Dogs are usually trained using positive reinforcement and voice commands. However, without being able to speak, the boy struggled to train his dog using body language. Charlie was slow to learn and was often distracted or confused when it came to learning tricks.

However, one magical afternoon, the little boy led Charlie away from the adults and other kids and, for the first time, dared to speak, instructing the little dog to sit, an order which was promptly obeyed. In so doing, Charlie had given a boy, who simply couldn't trust people, the opportunity to be vulnerable in front of another living thing, teaching him that his words have value and deserve to be respected.

A helping hand

As part of our lessons on life skills, we do an exercise called MY 5 where the children are asked to trace their hand and, in the outlines of each of their five fingers, write the name of someone they can rely on or call in times of need. They usually list parents, teachers, older siblings, community leaders and other mentors.

However, in one session, an Underdog graduate who had come back as a peer leader participated in the exercise, confidently finishing before the rest of the class. When he read out his MY 5, four of the people he could rely on were Underdog staff or volunteers. This touched our hearts, proving that we were providing a safe space where vulnerable children could benefit from emotional growth, guidance, care, support and fun.

Eddy

When Eddy joined our programme, he struggled to get on with his peers and engaged in a dominant and aggressive manner. Eddy was paired with Goofy, known to be one of our stronger dogs that would require a calm and steady hand to train. This added responsibility seemed to ignite a sense of pride in Eddy. He took his lessons seriously, opening up and working well as part of a team. His dog learned quickly, which gave Eddy a strong sense of accomplishment.

At his last session, Eddy shared that the programme had changed the way he feels about animals, helping him see that they have feelings rather than just being useful for fighting or protection. He started sharing food with stray dogs in his local community and even reached out to a neighbour who kept his dog chained, encouraging him to treat the pet kindly and take it for walks. Eddy's case demonstrates the capacity for at-risk youths to learn the value of compassion, kindness and responsibility through their relationships with dogs.

Complete turnaround

The children on our programme struggle with complex emotional and behavioural issues, often being labelled as "no-hopers" by society. Initially, we struggled with one such child who behaved terribly during his sessions, stealing from the classroom, challenging volunteers and refusing to partake in activities.

However, we believe in the power of positive affirmation, not only to train our dogs but also in the way we relate to our children and youths. We adopted a gentle approach with the young man, rewarding good or thoughtful behaviour and, instead of reinforcing negative behaviour, invited the boy to sit outside if he needed space. Our patience was rewarded when, after four sessions, he offered to help our volunteers pack up. Soon the troubled boy transformed into one of our star pupils who was, by far, the most thoughtful and helpful in his group. His story proves that kindness breeds kindness, which underpins everything we set out to achieve at The Underdog Project.





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