

## HEALTH



Participants calling themselves Kwai (left) and Ah Ching play with dogs during a Chinese Evangelical Zion Church Social Service Division press conference. Photo: Edward Wong

# THERAPY DOGS LEAD YOUNG TO OVERCOME SOCIAL FEARS

**Animal interaction** programme is proving an effective first step to help withdrawn residents defeat inhibitions and get back into work or study

Kathy Gao and Lai Ying-kit

Therapy dogs have proven to be very effective in bringing young, withdrawn Hongkongers out of their shells, University of Hong Kong researchers say.

Participants of animal-assisted therapy are more likely to go back to school or look for a job, rather than continuing to stay cooped up at home, surfing the internet, an HKU study shows.

Such therapy was particularly successful in raising the self-esteem of reclusive people who might otherwise shy away from engaging in social interaction that did not involve animals, the researchers said.

A psychiatrist explained that the animals could help because they were not “demanding or expecting certain achievements” from their human friends.

The two-year study examined 68 socially withdrawn subjects aged between 13 and 29. All were from a programme by the Chinese Evangelical Zion Church Social Service Division that had used animals to help more than 200 people with social inhibitions since 2010.

“About 80 per cent have either gone back to work or school,” the division’s general secretary Ng Yan-ho said.

In the project by HKU’s social work and social administration department, the participants’

employment rate rose from 7 per cent to about 55 per cent after they took part in the therapy.

One 18-year-old participant, who called herself Ah Ching, has banished the disillusionment created by her school life and is working to rebuild the social



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AH CHING

connections she has cut since Secondary Four.

Through contact with therapist dog “Fat Fat” and a class on pet grooming, Ah Ching said she now saw a need for change.

“I have overcome the fear of social contact,” she said. “Now, I am more willing to say ‘good morning’ to strangers, which I had no courage to do in the past.”

In her job as a restaurant bartender, which she secured last month, Ah Ching said she would try to show her care for others. “I would ask if my colleagues are angry, and make some food for them if they are,” she said.

Ng said the therapy generally lasted about a year before the subjects were confident enough to go back to work or study.

A separate HKU survey found about 1.9 per cent of Hongkongers aged between 13 to 29, trans-

lating into 16,900 to 41,000 young people, were socially withdrawn.

The government has no service to help socially withdrawn people, who, according to psychiatrist Dr William Fan Tak-wing, tend to stay home and play online games to avoid social life.

Fan said animal-assisted therapy focused on how to interact with animals rather than talking about the problems those people faced. That made them more willing to talk to counsellors.

“But animals act only as a bridge between professional counsellors and the socially withdrawn,” Fan, president of the Animal Therapy Foundation, said. “The most important thing is the advice counsellors give. The human-animal interaction is like a mirror reflecting problems they might have when interacting with others.”