



## Topic: Dolphin-Assisted Therapy

# Magical fun, maybe ... but is swimming with dolphins therapy?

### Research tells us:

A close examination of studies of dolphin-assisted therapy (DAT) reveals significant flaws in research methods and analyses. The available evidence, therefore, does not support claims that DAT improves the functioning of young children with disabilities.



### Take another look:

Read or download the complete research synthesis in the *Bridges* section of [www.researchtopractice.info](http://www.researchtopractice.info):

Humphries, T. L. (2003). Dolphin-assisted therapy as a behavioral intervention for young children with disabilities. *Bridges*, 1(1).

Exciting print, web-based and multimedia materials of interest to parents and early childhood practitioners are available from the Center for Evidence-Based Practices. To order by telephone, please call 800-824-1174.

While interaction with a dolphin might be a delightful, stimulating, reinforcing, and highly enjoyable experience for human beings at any age, its effectiveness as a way to promote learning and development for young children with disabilities has not been confirmed by research.

Tracy L. Humphries, Ph.D., of the Research and Training Center on Early Childhood Development, analyzed available research to determine whether adequate evidence exists to support claims that dolphin-assisted therapy (DAT) improves the mental, physical, or social-emotional behaviors of young children who have disabilities. She made an extensive, computer-assisted literature search to locate studies for review. Six studies, including a total of 294 participants, were selected for this synthesis: inclusion of children with an actual or developmental age under six years; inclusion of descriptions of the practice of dolphin therapy; and description of the results of the practice.

All of the study authors reported benefits for children who participated in DAT, regardless of child disability or background. A close look at their research methods and outcome data, however, casts doubt on the effectiveness of the practice. First, the reports of positive outcomes are based on an extremely limited amount of data. Second, all the studies failed to control for factors that could affect the accuracy of their conclusions. Third, the reported positive changes in child behavior may be due to a variety of influences present during the studies other than the work with dolphins.

Based largely on the results of the studies examined, as well as similarly designed studies with adults, claims about DAT's benefits are widely promoted as having been proven. This research falls short, however, and ultimately fails to support claims that DAT is effective for improving the behaviors of young children with disabilities. Additional, better designed and controlled research is needed to determine whether or not dolphin-assisted therapy is truly an effective intervention that should be used by parents and practitioners worldwide.

### Acting on the evidence:

Young children may enjoy well-structured, carefully supervised times of interaction with domesticated dolphins in settings where child safety and humane treatment of the animals are given priority. The activity may be used as a reinforcement for desired behaviors, or it may simply be seen as a memorable experience. More scientifically rigorous research is needed, however, before parents and practitioners can be confident that it has therapeutic value.