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Autistic Kids Benefit From Therapy Dogs

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A dog therapy program in Austin has caught the attention of the University of Texas for its work with children with autism. Debi Krakar, Executive Director of Austin Dog Alliance started the program after seeing a need during her in-school visits with the [dogs](#).

"We started to realize we could use our dogs and teach the kids social skills," said Krakar, who uses specially trained dogs to practice real-life situations with children with autism.

For many children with autism, social skills don't come naturally so the goal is to help them figure that out.

Pamela Buchanan is part of the Autism Project at the University of Texas, a program that is studying Austin [Dog Alliance's](#) Dog Therapy for autistic children.

"Understanding the importance of eye contact, the tone with which to speak with someone and the reaction from them. The barking, being able to tolerate that auditory information and process it appropriately," said Buchanan, who add that is also important for the kids to learn how to feel textures and absorb sounds. "With pets we learn how to touch appropriately, we talk about the tactile issues with short hair versus long-hair, the movement, how tight or gently to hold an animal, if the animal licks you how to tolerate that wetness."

Dr. Jody Jensen, a professor at UT, also works with the Autism Project. She says the number of people being diagnosed with autism is growing. One in 110 children will be diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

"We clearly know that some of increase is because of more attention to it. There's an increase in the number of doctors who are aware of the syndrome," said Dr. Jensen.

For parents, the program has become a necessity.

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"They just want that attention and praise and that's so much what our kids need because so much of the time they're on the fringe and outside of the peer group," said Kat Foy, who is a parent of an autistic teenager.

The goal for the project is to expand with an instructional manual. Krakar says she is documenting her progress in order to write that manual. She would also like to expand the program but says she needs more funding to train people and dogs.

For more information, log-on to www.austindogalliance.org.