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**KEY LARGO**

**Ill children find relief in the water**

**Sun, water and dolphins have proved to be a healthy recipe for many sick and disabled children who have long sought remedy for their ailments.**

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Squirt is an unlikely name for a therapist who spends his days working with disabled and terminally ill children.

But as a 650-pound bottlenose dolphin, Squirt is kind of an unlikely therapist.

Still, nearly every day, Squirt and his dolphin cohorts share their tanks with children who need the special touch of the playful mammals.

At Island Dolphin Care in Key Largo, the daily routine for the dolphins and trainers is healing and hope -- making the lives of their young clients better.

They do that by guiding the kids into the water and letting them "play" with the dolphins -- who seems to know exactly what to do.

Sometimes, it's a ride on the dorsal fin. Other times, it's following the soft-spoken commands of the youngster in the water.

For those children who can't swim or don't want to, a low floating dock lets allows for some close contact.

"Dolphin therapy" is fairly new and it isn't exactly a standard accepted medical practice, but proponents say the kids *do* change once they start spending time with the animals.

"When the kids get into that water and touch the dolphins it's like nothing else in the world," says Deena Hoagland, who helped start the program at Island Dolphin Care and is now its director. ``The calm surroundings help them not to think of their problems for a while and that's a nice change for them."

Psychologist Sue Lindeblad, an assistant professor at the University of Miami who now serves on the group's board of directors, has done several studies that show the dolphin swims help the children and their families focus on something other than the next medical treatment.

It also alleviates those "left-out" feelings many ill or disabled kids have and gives them a sense of independence.

"[There has been] improvement in the behavior of both child and parent," says Lindeblad. ``Parents weren't so demanding once they saw their child actually get out there and do what the other kids were doing. Seeing them as independent to some extent rather than helpless, changes their expectations and perceptions especially if the interaction is outside of the hospital. The program is a great motivator."

Dr. Norman Bamberg, an oncologist who recently retired from the Miami Heart Institute, said the therapy has an effect -- even though probably more psychological than physical.

"I think it's therapeutic, definitely," he said. ``An interaction with another being stirs their senses and allows them to open up. This may also help the improvement of the existing condition."

Dolphin therapy has done enough good that the program, a nonprofit, got a grant from the Dade Community Foundation.

"We give it to them because of the quality work they do," said Charisse Grant, director of programs for the foundation. "Because our foundation aims at improving the lives of others, we help out programs with the same cause, and that's what Island Dolphin Care does for these kids."

The program started in 1991 when Hoagland and her family moved from the high altitudes of Denver to Key Largo.

Because her son Joe was born with a congenital heart disease, the thin mountainous air made it tough for him to breathe.

Soon after, though, Joe suffered a stroke that left the right side of his body paralyzed. Hoagland said she had heard some talk about dolphin-assisted therapy, so she checked in at Dolphins Plus.

When she was told the program didn't exist there, she asked owner Lloyd Borguss to let Joe play with the dolphins.

Borguss said he saw that Joe began moving his right hand in an attempt to feed the dolphins -- and he agreed a program to help kids like Joe at his facility would be a good idea.

"We decided we wanted to do something for someone but needed some direction," Borguss said.

"After she came along with her son it was like a glove that fit and since then the program has taken off."

It started with four kids, and now more than 1,200 kids participate in its camps every year.

Kids from all over the country and abroad come to learn about sea life by also taking part in classroom activity and visiting "Fonzie's backyard" -- a special touch tank named after a beloved dolphin that died recently. He had earned his name after getting a reputation for flirting with the ladies.

Here, kids pull up in wheelchairs and seats to play with sea horses and star fish that are let out into a reservoir in front of them.

"It's a place where the kids can have the ocean come to them," Hoagland says. "They love to feel the fish in their hands."

In the classroom where pictures of dolphins cover the walls, kids engage themselves in dolphin talks with their counselors to learn about the mammals they swim with.

Then they gather at the paint supply table to decorate wooden dolphins painting and writing their names in glitter while giggling and talking to one another.

"Class time encourages them to recognize the differences in one another," says Hoagland. "They grow to understand that being different is OK."

Because Dolphin Island Care is not-for-profit, it depends on its sponsors to help build the program.

Right now, the goal is to finish a new building that will house 3-D, life-size dolphin aquariums, a library and more classrooms.

Donated money also helps pay for kids who otherwise couldn't afford to come to the camps.

A five-day camp session costs about \$2,200, including extended time with the dolphins and all other indoor and outdoor activities.

Half-day camps are also offered and are free to kids who visit from institutions like clinics, hospitals and foster homes.

For Gian Dai, the mother of an autistic 15-year-old named Carey, the program is another chance to help her son.

"I signed up for this program because regular therapy hasn't helped so far," Dai says. "Even though he can't say much, he looks really excited to be here."