

An Excerpt From

Creature Comforts

FOR CHILDREN WITH PHYSICAL OR MENTAL CHALLENGES, A THERAPY ANIMAL CAN WORK AS WELL AS- OR BETTER THAN- TRADITIONAL MEDICINE. JUST ASK ONE OF THESE THREE AMAZING KIDS.

BY JEANNETTE MONINGER

Day of the Dolphin

When Chase Saraney, 8, was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome—a mild form of autism—four years ago, his parents weren't surprised. They knew he was obsessed with order ("He'd push in the chairs at the kitchen table until they were all uniformly in line," says his mom, Dawn), and they noticed that on playdates he'd never really look at the other kids.

But what did surprise Dawn and Chase's dad, Brian, who were living in Fort Lauderdale at the time, was how difficult it is to treat the condition. They tried taking Chase to an occupational therapist, but the sessions didn't improve his lagging social skills. And because he tested high for aptitude (children with Asperger's often have above-average intelligence), he wasn't eligible for state assistance, so Dawn decided to homeschool him.

Two years ago, while researching Chase's condition online, Dawn happened upon Island Dolphin Care center (IDC). The Key Largo, Florida, facility offers five-day therapy sessions (highlighted by daily water time with the mammals) designed to help kids with a variety of developmental delays and terminal illnesses. The Saraneys were intrigued, and applied for the program. They qualified for financial aid—the cost is \$2,200, not



including transportation—and headed south with their son.

Chase didn't get to jump into the lagoon right away. First, he headed for the classroom. "We want kids with his condition to learn that it's okay if things don't always go exactly as they plan," says Gretchen Thomasson, his IDC instructor. When Chase was disappointed with a dolphin sculpture he'd made, Thomasson helped him focus on his good effort. When he became frustrated by his poor penmanship—erasing the letters so hard that he tore a hole through the paper—she had him try to trace them in shaving cream instead. His parents noticed that Chase controlled his emotions better than he ever had before. That's because he wanted to earn his 30 minutes of dolphin time each day.

In the water, Thomasson worked on Chase's ability to make eye contact as they had a back-and-forth conversation. "This skill comes easily to most of us, but not for kids like him," she says. Finally, Chase got to meet Sarah, his dolphin for the week. He loved stroking her back and using hand signals to make her jump, race around the pool, and talk. His favorite command: asking her to bring him a "present." Sarah would return with seaweed, shells, and other underwater treasures.

When he got back home, he was a different boy—happier, calmer, and more confident. "He felt very special and very normal at IDC, and that feeling stayed with him," Dawn says. The Saraneys, who now live in Murphy, North Carolina, feel comfortable sending him to public school, and he's made the "all A" honor roll for the past two years. He behaves better on playdates and even swims for a community team. And he never misses a chance to talk about his dolphin experience. "I let people know that dolphins aren't slimy. They feel like a rubber ball," Chase says. "And they're very smart." ☆