

Behavior of Dolphins Towards Adults and Children During Swim-With-Dolphin Programs and Towards Children with Disabilities During Therapy Sessions.

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In recent years, dolphin-assisted therapy has become very popular and an increasing number of facilities worldwide offer therapy programs with dolphins. In contrast to other animal-assisted therapy programs, dolphins are not domestic animals; they are mostly caught in the wild and there are still no studies on their behavior during these therapies. However, there is speculation that the behavior of dolphins toward people with mental and physical disabilities may play an important role in the success of the therapy. We observed 83 sessions with five untrained dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) at Dolphins Plus, a fenced area with ocean water in the Florida Keys, USA. Our detailed observations of contact and distance behavior between dolphins and different groups of swimmers (adults, children, and children with mental and physical disabilities) show that, in general, dolphins prefer small humans to adults. One dolphin showed a clear preference toward children with mental and physical disabilities, and we conclude that she showed assisting behavior. © 2003 International Society for Anthrozoology