



# ANIMALS HELP REDUCE COMMUNICATION ANXIETY: WHICH IS “BEST”—FUR, FEATHERS, OR SCALES?



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# ANIMAL INTERACTION IS BENEFICIAL

- Enhances learning (Daly & Suggs, 2010; Hummel & Randler, 2012)
- Improves physical and emotional health (Siegel, 2004; Von Bergen, 2015)
- Reduces communication anxiety in college students (Fuhrman & Rubenstein, 2017; Shiloh et al., 2003)
- **Little is known about how animal interaction could reduce communication anxiety in students prior to entering college**



# OBJECTIVES

1. Identify how animal interaction can potentially reduce communication anxiety in 4-H youth preparing to deliver a public presentation
2. Describe characteristics of animals which are most effective at reducing communication anxiety in 4-H youth presenters

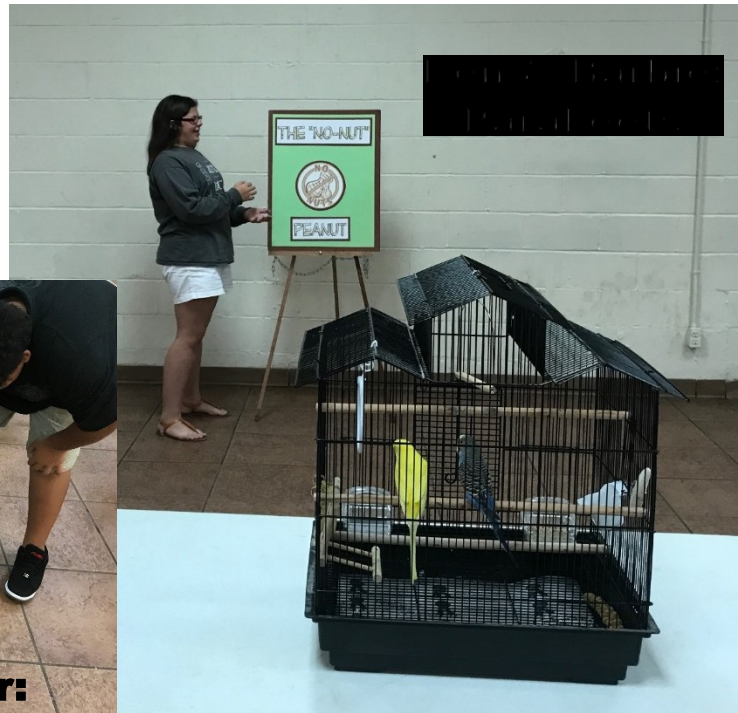






# ANIMAL AMBASSADORS & 4-H'ERS

- Over four weeks of speaking practice in preparation for District Project Achievement, safe interaction was encouraged between 4-H participants and...



**Speedy:  
Map Turtle**



**Cali:  
Chihuahua/Papillon Mix  
(Chion)**



**Thumper:  
Mini Holland Lop**



# DATA COLLECTION

- Semi-structured interviews with six purposively sampled 4-H'ers (2 females, 4 males) after participating in District Project Achievement
  - Conducted by 4-H Agent and Senior 4-H'er who took notes

Pseudonym	Grade-level	Years Participating	Speech Topic
Jay	4 <sup>th</sup>	1 year	Running Safety
Logan	5 <sup>th</sup>	1 year	Food Preservation
Blake	5 <sup>th</sup>	2 years	Owls
Nick	6 <sup>th</sup>	3 years	Emergency Prep.
Sarah	6 <sup>th</sup>	3 years	Peanuts
Becky	6 <sup>th</sup>	3 years	Volunteer Develop.



# DATA ANALYSIS

- Transcribed audio recorded interviews verbatim
- Implemented constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)
  - Research team individually reviewed transcripts
  - Compared overarching domains and integrated categories
  - Upheld trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and transferability (Dooley, 2007) with...
    - Methodological journals
    - Peer debriefing
    - Member-checking



# FINDINGS

- Four reoccurring themes emerged...
  1. Animals reduced anxiety toward public speaking
  2. Animal type influenced public speaking feelings
  3. Animals strengthened communication confidence
  4. Animals made participants more excited about speaking





## ANIMALS REDUCED ANXIETY TOWARD PUBLIC SPEAKING

- *“...when I was doing District Project Achievement, the animals that I had in the room just helped calm my nerves...I loved having any of the animals in the room actually. It really helped relax me.”*
- *“...they made me feel confident in myself. They made me feel good inside. When I was with the animals, it made me feel confident. When I was without the animals, I had to think more to do what I had to do.”*
- *“...the animals helped me because they are always happy, so it makes me feel happy and relaxed and stuff.”*





# ANIMAL TYPE INFLUENCED PUBLIC SPEAKING FEELINGS

- *“My favorite was the **dog** because thinking about its cute little face gave me more confidence. And when she would do the happy dance...She would dance around on her back feet and smile at me.”*
- *“The **dog** was excited to see me or something...it just calmed me down...it made me feel comfortable.”*
- *“I loved him (**rabbit**) hopping around...It was always happy so it made me feel confident. I could actually talk to something.”*
- *“The **turtle** was my favorite because every time I would put my finger around the outside of the tank...it would follow it. He made me feel confident in myself.”*



## ANIMALS STRENGTHENED COMMUNICATION CONFIDENCE

- *“...they just reminded me to calm down while I am speaking...like to have more fluency with my words and to stay organized.”*
- *“I just made myself think that the animals are actually just in the room.”*
  - Live animals are not allowed at District Project Achievement events



## ANIMALS MADE PARTICIPANTS MORE EXCITED ABOUT SPEAKING

- *“I did not want to do it at first. Mom, Nonnie, and you [the 4-H Agent] tried to get me to do it. I was like nope. Then Mom told me Cali (dog) and Thumper (rabbit) would be there. So, I changed my mind. I wanted to do it.”* – Jay, 1st year participant
- *“Well, when I was with the animals, it made me feel confident. When I was without the animals, I had to think about more.”* – Blake, 2nd year participant
- *“Well, without the animals, it was not so relaxing. I would mess up a lot. But then, with them, it really helped me.”* – Sarah, 3rd year participant
- *“She (dog) made me feel excited...I am ready to do it again next year. Are the animals coming back?”* – Becky, 3rd year participant





# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGE FACULTY

- The dog and rabbit were considered “best” at reducing anxiety (**fur is “best”**)
  - Two-way interaction (feedback) between student and animal increased student confidence and enthusiasm for speaking
- When teaching students pursuing careers educating youth...
  - Integrate animals that respond to human interaction
  - Repeated interaction with the same animal is recommended
  - For more novel animals (turtles or birds), host a “meet and greet” to reduce nervousness
  - Modeling interaction with animals can boost student-instructor rapport (Fuhrman & Rubenstein, 2017)

THANKS SO MUCH!

