



# INSIGHT

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## Hands-On Animal Contact

Childrens' laughter intermingles with the cooing of pigeons and the shrieks of gerbils and guinea pigs in the JIB's newest therapeutic center. Within several months a quiet classroom has been turned into a haven for turtles, rabbits, canaries, quail and ducks.

One of the newest ideas to take hold at the Institute, animal assisted therapy or 'zootherapy' provides an important new therapeutic tool for the blind and partially sighted. "It is lovely to see the responses of children to the animals and the gentleness with which they handle them," explains instructor Shula Atias, an experienced educator for the blind. Over a decade ago, Atias worked as an educational advisor at the Institute, and today she is also the Israeli coordinator of high school programs for visually impaired pupils. At present, she is completing her degree in animal-assisted therapy, and she can combine her love and appreciation of animals with her work with the blind.

"I see that the children relate well to the animals, and they open up about difficulties in their own lives as we are forced to deal with the cycle of life-births, deaths and the care required for the animals' well being." She points out a student that is bent and twisted with cerebral palsy, but as a dove perches on his shoulder, he proudly straightens up as much as possible, showing off the attractive bird.



*Hug the bunny — Inbal enjoys every minute of animal assisted therapy at the Institute*

### A Humane Touch

Psychologists think that animals elicit a positive response in humans, and all the more so in the blind who appreciate the tactile stimulation of holding a rabbit, or the smell of spreading clean sawdust in the cage of a gerbil. "All of their senses are stimulated, and as they learn about the habits and needs of the animals, and actually take care of them, their self esteem soars. Sometimes for the first time, the pupils



*Instructor Shula Atias helps students to understand the duck's habitat and cycle of life*

well being of an animal that is totally dependent on them," remarks Atias.

She has seen important interaction between the students that attend sessions with her while handling the respective animals, and their talk has often centered on their learning in a boarding school away from their families and situations in their own lives. "Basically, the classroom becomes a more humane place and the students develop a real sense of each other as well as a feeling of belonging," she adds.

Ideally a larger and more well-ventilated spot will be chosen for the animal corner, and a small pond is envisioned for the ducks and water fowl in the future. In the meantime, however, in spite of the crowded classroom, there is a contagious excitement at the Institute since the arrival of the animals. Atias hopes to increase the responsibility of the pupils, and she hopes to eventually enable groups to be responsible for collecting scraps from the kitchen and taking over much of the care and feeding of the animals.

With the help of the art teachers and students, she hopes to start decorating the walls with large murals of animals, and hopefully there will soon be water and food containers of clay made in the ceramics workshop. In addition to a well-tended animal corner, Atias has succeeded in building a modern animal-assisted therapeutic center. Far more important than a lesson in zoology, however, the students are learning to value life, and in the meantime, their value for themselves as well as their self esteem is rising.