

# SADIE TOUCHES THE WORLD



By Carol Stock Kranowitz, MA

*"It's just easier to be with animals,"* says Sadie Friedman. As we settle down for a Zoom chat, she hoists her snow-white therapy animal, Ethan, onto her lap. She cuddles and strokes this enormous rabbit, the size of a cocker spaniel, and says, "Animals don't expect you to do small talk."

While small talk with humans can be a big challenge, Sadie has always communicated easily with animals, birds, reptiles, and bugs. She grew up collecting critters while she explored the woods and waded in creeks near her Maryland home. She remembers as a preschooler

searching for 17-year cicadas during the 2004 emergence of Brood X.

She also recalls an elementary-school field trip to Washington's National Zoo. "We were lined up outside the Gorilla House, just chilling in one spot," she says. "I saw a chipmunk near the railing. It was just chilling, too. I leaned down and petted him. He sat there and let me pet him."

Sadie's ability to be a chipmunk whisperer — her "extra-sensory grace" — is one of her noteworthy differences. Indeed, her teacher was so impressed with

the chipmunk incident that he sent her parents a note praising her special gift.

Meanwhile, autism, SPD, and dyslexia hindered Sadie's academic success. Her bugaboos included certain sounds and textures that were as uncomfortable as they were unavoidable. This smart girl disliked school and was not college-bound.

One day, in the car on the way to high school, she told her mother Laurie, "I can't, I can't, I just can't do it."

Laurie got it. She turned the car around and drove straight to the car wash. They sat inside the car and got a vigorous vestibular, proprioceptive, visual, and auditory workout. Then they went to the park for a nature walk and bumped into a therapist friend who gave Sadie a little cranio-sacral therapy (CST). The friend had a Bernese mountain dog with her, which Sadie sat with and petted for a while.

Guess what? This spontaneous, multi-part therapeutic program included the alerting, organizing, and calming ingredients that were just right for that girl on that morning. This was an example of great collaboration: Sadie could express what her challenge was, her mother could recognize and cope with Sadie's sensory needs, the therapist could practice her art and science on the spot, and the dog could provide the final touch of soothing sensory input.

Learning at school has been hard, but teaching others is something Sadie does well. She has found satisfaction working for Montgomery County Parks as a shadow for kids with special needs. "I'm ok with most children," she says. "I'm entering adulthood and have a better understanding. Kids with special needs see the world so differently. They can seem scary if they're dysregulated and misunderstood. I know what that's like."

She muses, "A lot of scary animals are misunderstood. Arthropods, like scorpions and tarantulas, are pretty cool. They aren't really aggressive. They only sting or bite when they are scared themselves. The first thing a tarantula

does when it's scared is to kick hairs off its thorax. That's the big round part that includes the abdomen and butt. The hairs are itchy. Predators don't like the itchy feeling and back away."

Sadie has often cradled tarantulas in her hand. The critters are unafraid and don't kick hairs. Sadie is calm, too. On the other hand, she finds that touching a particular book cover may give her the "creeps." Such are tactile differences!

Today, Sadie strokes Ethan's long ears and says thoughtfully, "Tarantulas are like people with autism. When there are too many demands, we may seem scary, but we just want to flick our hairs and run away — no real damage done!"

Now 23, Sadie has found her niche as a trainee at Petco, a major pet supply chain. She enjoys her apprenticeship in the art of dog grooming while she learns skills such as handling skittish puppies, determining how high an animal's quick is before clipping its nails, and giving pattern haircuts, including the skirt cut for schnauzers and the lamb cut for poodles. At the completion of her training, she will have a license, a job, and a future.

Finding her niche has changed Sadie's life. The Petco training program may be a good fit for many animal lovers



like her. "We are just people" she says. "Dyslexia and ASD — they're just a trait that people have. Sure, I'm going to be slow sometimes. I need a minute to process information, to check and recheck directions. But you know what? My teacher seems happy to have me double check how to use a nail clipper!"

In answer to a question about life goals, Sadie says, "I have a fantasy to start my own business, my own wildlife facility. I'd like to teach people what to do, say, with an injured squirrel. And to educate people why pets behave the way they do, how to understand fur and how to get rid of mats,

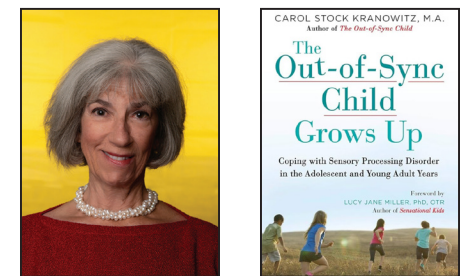
what products to use to care for pets, and especially how to touch them. I'd like to write a mini-guide. I have a lot of things I'm good at, and a lot of things I'd like to make happen, and now I know I can do them."

As we end our chat, Sadie eases Ethan the Rabbit off her lap and rises. She has work to do. ■

Carol's "Sync" series includes *The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up*, in which she describes extra-sensory grace. Visit [www.out-of-sync-child.com](http://www.out-of-sync-child.com) and [www.facebook.com/CarolStockKranowitz/](http://www.facebook.com/CarolStockKranowitz/) for more information.



Meet Sadie & Ethan



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