

## Empowering Special Needs Paws for a Brighter Tomorrow

See how one pup became an ambassador for disabled animals helping to raise funds to send to rescue organizations focused on disabled pets.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

[Download Interview Transcript](#) | [Download my FREE Podcast](#)

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- This month's Pet Game Changer is veterinarian and educator Dr. Melissa Shapiro, guardian of the world famous deaf, blind, pink puppy, Piglet, and the Piglet Mindset® platform
- From a very young age, Dr. Melissa was drawn to disabled, special needs pets; as empty-nesters, she and her husband began adding dogs to the family, including a tiny, one-pound very special needs pup they named Piglet
- Dr. Melissa was committed to giving Piglet, who couldn't do all the things sighted, hearing dogs enjoyed, a productive and meaningful life
- The Piglet Mindset platform and its mission to inspire children and adults to be resilient, inclusive, and kind, is the result of Dr. Melissa's commitment to Piglet, and Piglet's ability to inspire others to face life's challenges with a positive attitude

My guest today is veterinarian Dr. Melissa Shapiro, who was nominated for a Game Changer award by Janet. We'll be talking today about Dr. Melissa's wonderful platform, Piglet International Inc., and the Piglet Mindset®, where the mission is to inspire children and adults to be resilient, inclusive, and kind.

The following are some highlights from our conversation, but I encourage you to watch the video (during which Piglet and his crew pop in and out!) or read the transcript for the full interview.

### Disabled, Special Needs Pets Tugged at Her Heartstrings

Dr. Melissa explains that she knew she wanted to become a veterinarian at a very young age.

*"It was my only goal in life, and I feel very fortunate to have achieved that goal because being a veterinarian, as you know, is both a job and a lifestyle," she explains. "I've had a very nice career and feel very fortunate to have been a **house call vet** in lower Fairfield County, Connecticut for decades. My clients are wonderful, and I work with an amazing veterinary hospital as my base. I've been able to practice good medicine without the worry of financial limitations.*

*That said, I've also always been very partial to disabled, special needs dogs and cats — primarily dogs because I'm allergic to cats. I grew up with a blind dog. I adopted a dog, April, in veterinary school after meeting her in a research lab, where she had been made diabetic.*

*She was with me for many years after graduation. I gave her insulin shots twice a day. I would call her a 'very special needs' dog, but also an ambassador who helped me learn that there will always be animals with a variety of issues that we must learn to deal with."*

Dr. Melissa got married after vet school, and over the years she and her husband were pet parents to not only April, but another dog, Jamie, along with a deaf Border Collie and a disabled house sparrow. Once their three children started leaving for college, they began adding dogs to the family.

## **1-Pound Puppy Piglet Arrives — Deaf, Blind, and Pink**

*"Other passions of mine were **dog rescue** and animal welfare issues. We started adopting dogs," she explains. "We had six in our home by the time our youngest child left for college. Then I received an email from a friend of mine, a veterinarian in Georgia, who wrote, 'I have a little one-pound blind and probably deaf puppy who will be a special placement. Do you know someone who would be a good fit for him?'"*

*My initial reaction was, 'No one I know wants a dog like that, and I don't want another dog, because we already have so many.' But I also knew I had to do something to help my friend. Over the years, we had fostered dogs and found homes for them, so I said we would foster him. A few days later, little, tiny Piglet arrived. He's currently just six and a half pounds. Obviously, we still have him! He's the star of my social media platform and my life at this point. We adopted him after two months of great stress, because Piglet was not an easy puppy."*

Dr. Melissa assumed a one-pound puppy wouldn't be much trouble, but the truth was, Piglet was quite a handful.

*"He screamed all the time," she explains. "He was very upset, very anxious. He's deaf and blind, and I had never cared for a dog with both issues. But in short order, he sort of integrated into the household. He knew his routine, he knew we were going to get up in the morning, eat breakfast, and go to work. I taught him tap signals. He had friends at the veterinary hospital I was associated with, and he ultimately settled into a very comfortable, happy life with us.*

*I have a lot of friends across the country who have rescue organizations that cater to disabled dogs, and in particular, deaf and blind dogs. So, I made a Facebook page to find him a forever home. The page grew and ultimately became his Facebook page: Piglet, The Deaf, Blind, Pink Puppy. Facebook users found Piglet inspiring.*

*He motivated people to get out of bed in the morning if they were ill or injured or having a family problem or whatever, because he's a very positive dog who faces challenges in a positive way. That was his sort of motto."*

Dr. Melissa made a promise to herself and Piglet when she decided to adopt him that he would have a productive, meaningful life. He would be an ambassador for disabled animals and pets and would help raise funds to send to rescue organizations focused on disabled pets, including the organization that originally rescued Piglet.

## The Piglet Mindset® Is Born

A teacher in Plainville, MA reached out on Facebook to ask Dr. Melissa if there were Piglet videos she could show to her students as part of a growth mindset teaching model. At the time, Dr. Melissa didn't know how to make videos, but she made the teacher a PowerPoint presentation: The Story of Piglet, the Deaf, Blind, Pink Puppy. The kids loved it, and the teacher came up with the idea for Piglet Mindset.

*"Using animals to engage kids is a very effective teaching model," says Dr. Melissa. "So, we ended up creating this program. I developed all the materials, but it was the teacher's idea, so I give her most of the credit. The program has grown and grown. I have PowerPoints on the website that teachers can download for free."*

*I revised the program this past summer so that it's more aligned with the CASEL framework. Also, Piglet got a **Dodo video**. He became very popular online. The Dodo video had 13 million views, and then everything really took off. In 2019, we were in People Magazine. I got a book deal to write about Piglet. There's a memoir and a children's book that can be purchased wherever books are sold."*

In addition to their online presence, Dr. Melissa and Piglet also make school visits, either in person or virtual, and there are plans in the works to tour California, and perhaps the entire country.

## Piglet's Housemates Also Have Lessons to Teach

The other Shapiro dogs are also involved in the Piglet project to varying degrees. Georgie, also deaf and blind, was left in a box on a sidewalk on December 30, 2022. According to Dr. Melissa, Georgie and Piglet have completely different personalities and different approaches to their disabilities.

*"They're both very positive," she says, "but Piggy is very detail oriented. Georgie is a wild man. They are not good friends, which is unfortunate for our platform, but a great lesson for everybody. They are fine together as long as Georgie doesn't put his face in Piglet's nose. But the problem with the two of them, is that this one (Georgie) is very wild, and he bangs into Piglet if they're playing. Piglet doesn't like that because he can't see. It's too surprising for him."*

*He's a little more structured, but he's also very accepting and flexible, and that's part of his lesson. Over time, he has adjusted. Georgie and Piglet can sit next to each other, they do their tricks together, they travel together. The agreement is that they get along fine as long as they don't play together. I wouldn't call them buddies, but they each have buddies within our group, and everybody's good."*

I think this is a beautiful lesson to teach kids: you're not going to resonate with everyone in your world. You're just not. But we can all still be kind. We can hang out. We don't have to be besties, but we can be kind and respectful to one another. It's a great lesson.

Dr. Melissa's son insisted that Georgie would be a great addition to the Piglet platform, but she wasn't so sure.

*"As it turns out, Georgie is much more laid back about things than Piglet," she explains. "His whole learning style is very different from Piglet's, who was very systematic in everything he learned. Every day he does something new and different even at six and a half years old. Georgie is more of a big-picture guy."*

*He learns all the same things, but in a much different timeframe and fashion. I have a Piglet versus Georgie lesson that I give that really contrasts and compares two dogs with the same disabilities. The different breed mixes play a role as well. There are very obvious differences between them."*

## **An Example of How Piglet Meets Challenges**

Another fascinating, inspirational story about Piglet that Dr. Melissa tells is from his participation in an agility event in Ohio for special needs dogs.

*"He was learning to do the A-frame," she explains. "I was luring him with food, and I was holding his harness because he's six and a half pounds — if he fell off, it could be tragic. I held his harness and coaxed him up and down because he was a little bit nervous. He wasn't sure where he was going.*

*Then he started barking, and he just kept barking and barking. I didn't know what he wanted, so I took him out. I brought him food. He kept barking. I finally figured out that he wanted to go back on the A-frame. He did it over and over and over. That is who he is. He did it with tunnels as well. He learned to go through the tunnels by using his nose as I called to him and blew into the tunnel so he could find me.*

*I have a video of him at the A-frame, and I'm coaxing him. Then in the next video, he's going up and down very smoothly, showing how, with his limitations, he does the best that he can, which is pretty good. And he really enjoyed it. It's one of the best pair of videos I have that I show to the kids. I reserve it for my presentations. It's really a very effective and fun way for kids to learn, and they remember it years later."*

## **Why Say No When You Can Say Yes?**

I asked Dr. Melissa, when she wakes up each morning, what she loves most about the work she's doing.

*"Well, first of all, I love these dogs," she replies. "They're great teaching models; they're great on Instagram and other social media. I love that we were in People Magazine and on NBC Nightly News, and all of that. But first and foremost, I really love the dogs.*

*When I wake up in the morning, I am really thankful that I said yes to Piglet, and Georgie, and all my dogs, and that I'm able to give them a really unique purpose in life. Piglet and Georgie can't take hikes. They can't run free on the beach. They're tiny, and more importantly, they can't see or hear, and it would be dangerous. But they can do things other dogs don't. They reach people with their message and their awesomeness.*

*Their attitude is so just inspiring. Piglet motivates me to do all of this work. I am thankful to him, and I'm very thankful, of course, to the person who rescued him down in Georgia and sent him to me."*

There's so much Dr. Melissa and her dogs are teaching humanity. I asked her what one thing she would share with the world if she could.

*"Why say no when you can say yes?" she replies. "Sometimes you just need to go with your gut. If I hadn't gone with my gut, look what I could have missed out on."*

If you'd like to learn more about Dr. Melissa, Piglet and his buddies, you can find a wealth of information, including videos at her website, **[Piglet Mindset](#)**, as well as Piglet's **[Facebook](#)** and **[Instagram](#)** pages.

---