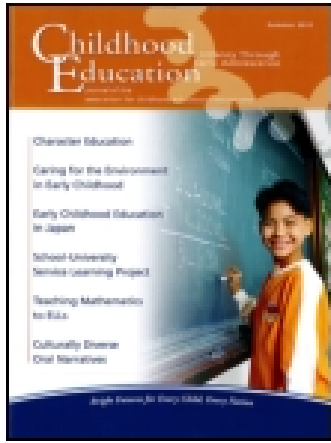


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“What are all these Dogs Doing at School?” : Using Therapy Dogs to Promote Children's Reading Practice

Mary Renck Jalongo^a

^a Early Childhood Education Journal , Indiana University of Pennsylvania , USA

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Mary Renck Jalongo
Mary Renck Jalongo is Professor, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and Editor, Early Childhood Education Journal.

“WHAT ARE ALL THESE DOGS DOING AT SCHOOL?”

Using Therapy Dogs To Promote Children’s Reading Practice

Describe a program in which struggling readers read aloud with a dog and its handler, and you will hear such questions:

“You’re joking, right?”

“Reading to a dog? Is that sort of like talking to your plants?”

“Do you mean that the dogs are supposed to get smarter if you read to them?”

After some explanation about the uses of therapy dogs in other fields, however, the underlying concept becomes a bit clearer:

“Most young children seem to have a natural affinity for animals, particularly dogs. It’s not unusual for my kids at home to cuddle up with the family pet while reading.”

“I suppose it builds motivation and interest in many reluctant readers to have a four-footed reading buddy.”

“It might be less stressful for a child to read aloud to a dog than to a teacher or a peer. After all, a dog won’t judge or correct you.”

“Why not? I’m sure that people were skeptical at first that dogs could give independence to people with disabilities, anticipate seizures, or comfort hospital patients. The more I think about it, the more it makes sense, but the program would have to be carefully planned and evaluated to sell my principal on the idea!”

This article discusses how registered therapy dogs can motivate and support children as they practice reading aloud in the company of the dog and with the support of the dog’s handler. It also offers practical advice to educators, librarians, administrators, and community members seeking to implement such a program in their communities.

THERAPY DOGS AND BEST PRACTICES IN READING

The use of registered therapy dogs in reading activities with children must be consistent with “best practices in literacy instruction” (Morrow, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2003). The most comprehensive of these programs is Reading Education Assistance Dogs, or R.E.A.D., which is implemented by the Intermountain Therapy Animals (www.therapyanimals.org).

“It might be less stressful for a child to read aloud to a dog than to a teacher or a peer. After all, a dog won’t judge or correct you.”

The author wishes to thank Kathy Klotz, the Executive Director of Intermountain Therapy Animals, and staff member Debbie Kennedy of Therapy Dogs International, Inc., for reviewing this article prior to publication. Two teachers and handlers of registered therapy dogs, Cheri Finotti (a 1st-grade teacher at Eisenhower Elementary in Indiana Area School District) and Marsha Robbins (a special education teacher with Pittsburgh Public Schools), generously provided practical suggestions on the article.

IMPLEMENTING A READING EDUCATION ASSISTANCE DOG PROGRAM

1. Understand the training component. In R.E.A.D., the handlers are trained to work with their dogs and provide reading support to the children. Teachers and reading specialists contribute their expertise in reading assessment and often work with school and/or public librarians to identify appropriate books for each child. Dogs for reading assistance are at a different training level than a service dog; the animals used in reading programs are not being "taken away" from children with special needs. It is not uncommon for therapy animals to have disabilities—something that would disqualify them from a service dog role. Therapy dogs need to be even-tempered around adults, children, and other dogs. They also need to be graduates of advanced obedience training that teaches them to ignore distractions, adapt quickly to different situations, and respond reliably to commands.
2. Gain strong administrative support and educate colleagues. Begin by making it clear that this is not a request to bring an untrained family pet along to school as a diversion or part of a large-group presentation. Rather, R.E.A.D. is a carefully planned reading program that involves collaboration among, at the very least, reading professionals, registered and insured therapy dogs and handlers, school and/or local library and media specialists, and the families/community (see www.therapyanimals.org for a printable brochure).
3. Address safety and liability issues. The best protection is prevention of problems. Work exclusively with trained, registered, and regularly evaluated handler/dog teams. The dogs of Therapy Dogs International, Inc. (www.tdi-dog.org) and the Pet Partners Program of the Delta Society (www.deltasociety.org) are rigorously evaluated prior to earning their registration; these dogs are taken on many visits to public places to ensure that their behavior is reliable, steady, and predictable (Peterson, 1999). In order to maintain their certification, TDI, Inc. handlers must renew their annual membership. The Delta Society requires all teams to re-test every two years.

Therapy Dogs International provides members in good standing with liability insurance; however, this coverage is for volunteers only. Therefore, a teacher cannot bring her or his own therapy dog to class and have insurance coverage, because she or he is in the role of employee rather than volunteer. One way for teachers to have the opportunity to

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Collaboration Among Personnel and Appropriate Reading Materials

Ideally, the dog handlers collaborate with the teachers, reading specialists, and librarians to understand the child's interests and identify books at the correct reading level. Often, the child arrives at the session with several appropriate high-quality books that the team recommends for the particular child; this careful match between book and child, as well as the opportunity to choose, are supported by reading research (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003). Providing struggling readers with texts that are "considerate" of their reading challenges is a critical variable in promoting vocabulary growth (Swanborn & de Glopper, 2002).

Supervised, Enjoyable Reading Practice

R.E.A.D. recommends that 20 minutes be set aside each week for struggling readers to practice reading aloud. Using the standard 180 school days, or about 40 weeks, this adds approximately 14 hours of supervised practice in reading aloud. This may not sound like much; even in a 90-minute language arts block, however, children may spend just a few minutes per day actually reading. Adult monitoring of individual children's reading is understandably limited in a busy classroom; even less reading practice may occur at home. Therefore, 20 minutes a week of enjoyable, supported practice with carefully selected materials may represent a significant increase over the amount of time that readers—particularly struggling readers—ordinarily devote to reading aloud. Enjoyment is essential because "low-ability readers learn words incidentally when they are reading for fun" and "one might consider before anything else letting them read . . . appealing texts" (Swanborn & de Glopper, 2002, pp. 113-114).

Motivation and Access to High-Quality Books

Research shows that work with therapy dogs can build motivation, maintain

focus, and increase task persistence, even when other interventions have failed (Granger, Kogan, Fitchett, & Helmer, 1998; Gunter, 1999; Heimlich, 2001). In the R.E.A.D. program, once a child reads 10 books, the child earns a book stamped with his or her favorite therapy dog's paw print. These "pawtographed" books, both fiction and nonfiction, go home with the child and "put books into children's hands" (Neuman & Celano, 2001, p. 8).

Social Support, Stress Reduction, and Enhanced Self-Esteem

The presence of a calm and well-trained dog offers a unique form of social support (Beck & Katcher, 2003) and invites peer interaction (Katcher, 1997). Additionally, medical evidence indicates that therapy dogs can reduce stress (Odendaal, 2001); when children were asked to read aloud under three conditions (to a peer, to an adult, and to a therapy dog), the presence of a therapy dog reduced children's blood pressure and heart rate to normal levels and diminished other observable signs of anxiety (Friedmann, Thomas, & Eddy, 2000). Working with animals is remarkably effective with students who have attentional difficulties, disruptive behaviors, or a general lack of interest in reading (Katcher & Wilkins, 1998; Kaufmann, 1997). Evidence is growing of the positive effects that companion animals, particularly dogs, have on children's behavior (Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004; Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell, 2000).

Comprehension Checks and Appropriate Pacing

In R.E.A.D., the dog handlers are trained to be enthusiastic facilitators of each child's reading practice. If, for example, a child is struggling with a word, the handler might supply the troublesome word to keep the reading flow going; if the book seems too difficult, the handler might suggest a suitable alternative. Handlers are encouraged to pay attention and use their instincts rather than adhere to some arbitrary formula,

work with their own therapy dogs is to volunteer for an after-school, summer, or library program in which they would be categorized as volunteers.

4. Consider the community. Before championing an animal-assisted therapy program, consider what the community will support and adopt a culturally responsive approach to pursuing the project. In urban settings, fierce dogs may be kept as protection and as a status symbol. As a result, children may have been taught to fear dogs. In some cultures, dogs are viewed with disgust, as a nuisance, or as a food source. Identify some community organizations and agencies that might lend support. Participation in the program needs to be completely voluntary and attractive alternatives to participation must be provided.
5. Plan the budget. Generate a list of everything that will be necessary to deliver the program, and then determine who will be responsible for payment. Talk with others who have experience in operating these innovative programs to get a sense of what to expect in terms of overall cost. Financial arrangements for these intervention programs vary. Usually, the dogs and their handlers work on a volunteer basis. Some handler/therapy dog teams have financial support from multiple sources, such as grants, professional organizations, or private donations. Typically, the major expense is the consumables—the books that are given to the children. Some teachers apply for mini-grants through their schools or work with local businesses or charitable organizations to defray the cost of the books. It is best to put the financial plans into a written budget that is shared with all of the responsible parties.
6. Determine which children are to participate. Realize that there may not be enough dog/handler teams to accommodate every child at the school. Therapy dog programs often focus on children with reading difficulties. Perhaps it might be better to use therapy dogs as an incentive in a summer program for children who need additional support in literacy learning. Realize also that animals, like people, have unique characteristics, so give careful consideration to the match between child and dog. A child who is very distractible might benefit from an older, mellow dog, while a child who is disinterested may brighten at the antics of a livelier animal.
7. Secure parents'/guardians' permission. After obtaining the support of supervisory personnel, obtain permission from the parent(s)/guardian(s) of every child to be involved in the program. After securing permission from families, determine if the individual child wants to participate. Verify the child's medical history so that children who are allergic to dogs or afraid of dogs will not be included. All

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registered therapy dogs are bathed or well-groomed immediately before a visit and treated with an anti-dander spray; thus, the most common source of allergic reactions is significantly reduced. It is strongly advised that the parent/guardian consult with the child's doctor if the child has any medical condition that might prohibit participation in the program.

8. **Address sanitation concerns.** Although animals can spread disease and infection or carry parasites, all registered therapy animals have regular check-ups with their veterinarians and are well cared for by their handlers. All Therapy Dogs International and Delta Society handlers are required to provide proof of vaccination and vet visits, as well as proof of insurance, to any institutions they visit. The field of pediatric nursing is an excellent resource for infection and disease control advice (Brodie, Biley, & Shewring, 2002), since over 600 hospitals in the United States sponsor animal-assisted activities and therapy programs (Peterson, 1999). On rare occasions, even a highly trained dog will become ill suddenly and vomit, urinate, or defecate in the school or on school property. Their handlers bear responsibility for cleaning up after their animals and are prepared to do so.
9. **Inform colleagues, staff, and families.** After all the necessary clearances are obtained, be certain to send a letter out to all of the families to remind them about the program and their child's participation in it. Make an attractive information board that highlights the purposes of the program. Take photographs of the handler/dog teams that will be visiting and post them on the bulletin board. Before the program begins, you may want to get permission to take digital photos to post on the school's Web site. Expect that such information will generate genuine excitement and animated conversations among the students and that they will know all the dogs' names when they arrive.
10. **Prepare children and staff.** Before the program officially begins, plan an interactive group presentation by the handlers that coaches the children on appropriate ways to interact with their canine reading companions. Children will be eager for the dogs to like them, so this is the time to reinforce being quiet, slow, and gentle with their reading buddies. Make this large-group session open to parents/families, and record multiple copies of the presentation so that families who were unable to attend can learn about the project at home.
11. **Plan for the dogs' safety and well-being.** Adults responsible for the program must be vigilant in protecting therapy dogs from harm. It is never the case that dogs and children are simply thrown together while adults stand idly by on the sidelines. Rather, it is important for all of the adults

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offering assistance when necessary. This helps to increase accuracy during independent practice, which improves comprehension and builds confidence in readers (Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich, & Share, 2002; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Swanborn & de Glopper, 1999). The therapy dog serves as an intermediary as the handlers check the child's understanding and even ask young readers to explain it to the dog (e.g., "Tell Rover about what you just read. What does it say?" or "Copper doesn't understand that big word. Can you explain?").

ADDRESSING READING DIFFICULTIES THROUGH ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY

Children with reading difficulties often: have language delays or disorders (Glazer, 1998), lack confidence in their reading abilities (Gallas, 1997), have limited access to interesting materials (Krashen, 1997; Neuman, 1999), acquire few opportunities to read in their environments at home or school (Adams, 1990; Cambourne, 2001; Krashen, 2001), have little motivation to read or interest in reading (Turner, 1997), experience comprehension difficulties (Block & Pressley, 2002), or are denied the chance to use literacy skills to accomplish tasks that have meaning for them (Jalongo, Fennimore, & Stamp, 2004). Animal-assisted therapy that brings dogs into reading class is not intended to take the place of effective instruction in reading; rather, it offers a more structured and appealing alternative to the common directive, "Go back to your seats and read to yourself." As Allington and McGill-Franzen (2003) concluded in their review of reading research, "Good teaching may go unrewarded if students do not practice those emerging skills and strategies successfully and extensively. It is during such successful, independent practice that students consolidate their skills and strategies and come to own them" (p. 74). Carefully planned, implemented, monitored, and evaluated programs that use registered therapy dogs as an incentive for children to practice their reading skills

merit further investigation and thoughtful consideration by educators.

The Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) program, developed by Intermountain Therapy Animals (ITA), has gained national attention. It has been featured on the national news, at the Westminster Dog Show, on National Geographic's *Dogs With Jobs*, and on PAX channel's *Miracle Pets*, and offers its own training materials and videos. R.E.A.D. resources include a training package, videos, templates for name badges, necessary forms, sample business cards for the dogs, bookmarks and posters, and a newsletter. The program has been so well-received that the Utah Chapter of the International Reading Association honored R.E.A.D. with its Celebrate Literacy Award in 2003.

Longitudinal research on R.E.A.D. collected over two school years is promising. The children selected to participate in the studies were identified as being at-risk for academic difficulties by the principal and social worker at Bennion Elementary School in Utah. Two culturally diverse groups of ten 5- to 9-year-olds were assembled and tested; the Reading Roots Assessment was used with kindergartners and 1st-graders and the Success for All test was used with 2nd- to 6th-graders. Group 1 was tested in September of 2000 and those scores were compared with June 2001 scores. A second group of 10 students was tested in September of 2001 and again in June of 2002. All of the children improved their reading scores significantly. Other indicators of the children's progress included decreased absenteeism, increased use of the library, and improved grades on report cards. Children's positive responses to therapy dogs and reading improvement also have been reported by the editors of *American Libraries* (2000; 2001), in *School Library Journal* (Newlin, 2003), and in the media (Bueche, 2003; <http://pawsforhealth.org>). Evidence is building that therapy animals can motivate children to complete academic tasks (Jalongo, 2004).

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS ON PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The opportunity to witness children's excitement and enthusiasm as they read with their canine partners often provides the impetus to get a program started. Cheri Finotti is a 1st-

grade teacher who became convinced of the power of therapy dogs as she volunteered with Maggie, a chocolate Lab, to work with a boy with Aspergers syndrome. Ordinarily, the child was uncommunicative about what happened each day. In fact, the boy's teacher customarily sent home written prompts that his mother used to encourage her son to talk. After working with Maggie, however, the child spontaneously told his mother about everything that had happened involving the therapy dog. Now that Cheri has retired, her plans are clear: she will devote herself to volunteering with Maggie and supporting children's reading efforts.

If you visited a "read with a dog" program, you might see scenes such as the following:

- A Benji dog look-alike, once living in a shelter and destined for euthanasia, hops out of the van, sporting his therapy dog cape. This dog, several others, and their handlers stop at the visitor's window of the elementary school, and the handlers put on their

involved to observe carefully and be alert to the first signs of difficulty. Children can sometimes get excited and act unpredictably around the dogs, accidentally injuring them in the process. All of the Therapy Dog International dogs are tested around hospital equipment. Attention also must be paid to the dog's health and stamina. It is unfair and unethical to overschedule therapy animals to the point of exhaustion; the Intermountain Therapy Animals professionals recommend no more than one and a half hours of work at a time for the dogs, with a 15-minute break in a designated area outdoors.

12. Decide how expansive the program will become. If a reading/therapy dog program is implemented with those students who have reading difficulties, do not be surprised if many other children and families wish to participate. Unlike other reading interventions that may inadvertently stigmatize children who lag behind peers in reading, one great advantage of R.E.A.D. and similar quality programs is that most children reading at or above grade level genuinely want to participate, too. Meeting this demand may require involving quite a few more registered therapy dogs and handlers. Another level of community collaboration can be beneficial; in this case, as educators, humane organizations, animal shelters, dog trainers, AKC members, 4-H, high school students, senior citizens, adults with special needs, and incarcerated individuals all can play a role in selecting, training, and evaluating therapy dogs. Accommodating children without reading difficulties may be best accomplished in a library-based program in which children sign up for a read-aloud session with the therapy dog and handler.

badges. Moments later, the little dog can be seen seated on the lap of an English language learner who is reading *The Last Puppy* (Asch, 1989), a picture book about a large litter of pups yearning to find homes. The child is determined to master the book; after she succeeds, the handler gets the dog to twirl on its hind legs in celebration, much to the child's delight.

- Goldie, a laid-back golden retriever with a red bandanna, is paired with her 4th-grade reading buddy. The boy has attentional difficulties; yet, Goldie's habit of resting her head on his knee keeps the boy calm and focused as he strokes her fur while reading. Later that day, the boy checks out three items from the library: *Love That Dog* (Creech, 2003) and the book and audiocassette of *How To Be Your Dog's Best Friend* (Monks of New Skete, 2002).

Many things have to be considered before launching an animal-assisted therapy reading program in a school. Usually, the next step is to contact the therapy dog organization(s) in your community and others who have successfully instituted such programs. Often, veterinarians and local animal shelters can put you in contact with therapy dog groups. If at all possible, arrange to observe a successful program in action. The sidebar (on pages 153-156) contains practical suggestions on implementing therapy dog programs in reading.

CONCLUSION

Work with therapy animals represents a burgeoning field of study that is not only interdisciplinary but also international (Jalongo, 2004; Melson, 2001). Using therapy dogs as part of a treatment plan developed by professionals has captured the imagination of many adults who work with children and families. Today, we are moving ever closer to empirically validating the dog's longstanding reputation for functioning as a loyal friend. Bolstered by research and persuaded by practical/professional experience, educators and librarians throughout the country and around the globe are bringing therapy dogs into education settings as a way to encourage children to practice reading aloud, anticipate reading sessions eagerly, build deeper understandings of reading materials, and learn to associate high-quality literature with enjoyment.

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To be considered, submissions must focus on the education of urban children between infancy through middle school and must integrate theory, research, policies, programs, and practices. Authors from outside of the United States are also encouraged to submit manuscripts.

Submission deadline is March 31, 2005. Please send three copies of the completed manuscripts to 2006 Annual Theme Issue, ACEI, 17904 Georgia Avenue, Ste. 215, Olney, MD 20832. Electronic versions of the manuscripts will also be accepted (Microsoft Word or rich text format). Preferred length is 2-5 journal pages (1,500-3,500 words).

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