

Adoring Listeners Give Struggling Readers a Boost

Published: May 30, 2006

by Gayle Hargreaves

No one pays attention quite like a dog. Take Aspen, a five-year-old golden retriever. Every week, Aspen travels with his owner, Lisa Benson, to a group home for boys in Newport County, Rhode Island. There, Aspen listens as the boys who live there take turns being his reading buddy.

Aspen and Benson are among a number of dog-human teams that visit two group homes in the area as part of a program called Reading Fur Fun developed by the Potter League for Animals, an animal shelter serving Newport County. The program also operates in local schools and libraries. The group home component of the program is run in cooperation with Child & Family Services of Newport.



Dog-Assisted Reading Programs

Sandi Martin, a critical care nurse, established the first comprehensive literacy program built around the idea of reading to dogs in 1999, after witnessing therapy pets in action in a hospital setting. Sandi launched the Reading Education Assistance Dogs program (R.E.A.D.) through the non-profit organization Intermountain Therapy Animals (ITA) in Salt Lake City, Utah.

The Potter League's Reading Fur Fun program is based on R.E.A.D. principles but is formally classified as Animal Assisted Activity (AAA) rather than Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) because the sessions do not have pre-determined and specific therapeutic outcomes and the program is staffed by volunteers rather than therapists.

Martin believed that in the presence of a therapy dog, children who were struggling with reading would be able to relax and become less anxious, be able to focus on their reading, and find reading fun, which would result in improved reading scores and improved self-esteem.

Martin's hypothesis was tested thousands of times as the R.E.A.D. program spread throughout North America. The results have been overwhelmingly positive as children, parents, teachers and literacy specialists have embraced the premise that reading to a dog is helpful, fun and less intimidating than reading aloud in a group or to another person.

Animals as Contributors to Human Health

Animal-assisted therapy has received a lot of attention in recent years and the benefits to human health and well-being have been widely touted. The Delta Society, an organization dedicated to improving human health through service and therapy animals, acts as a clearinghouse and funder of research and information on the subject. According to Delta, two decades of research shows that human-animal interaction can:

- lower blood pressure and reduce heart rate
- help children develop empathy and nurturing skills
- improve self-esteem and alleviate depression
- help establish mutual trust between therapists and patients
- provide nonjudgmental, forgiving and uncomplicated acceptance
- provide mental stimulation and opportunities for socialization to the elderly, the ill and the isolated
- provide non-threatening and pleasant physical contact
- foster a sense of oneness with life and nature.



“Many kids are reluctant to read, but because a dog doesn’t criticize or correct, they feel more confident reading to him,” says Debra Dyjak, one of the first volunteers to enroll in Reading Fur Fun at the Potter League. Keri Lyn Turner, Assistant Manager at Family Connections II, one of the CFS residential facilities, agrees. “A lot of our boys come in with very poor reading skills. Reading to the dog helps them because it’s a non-critical ear.”

Joyce Barton, director of volunteer services, and Patricia Heller, director of community outreach and development, brought the R.E.A.D program to the attention of staff at the Potter League in 2001. It took about a year to set goals and objectives, obtain books and supplies, enlist and train volunteers and find a suitable venue. By May 2002, Reading Fur Fun was up and running with a pilot program based at the Newport Public Library.

“We were a hit,” says Barton. Lynne Mallonee, director of humane education, adds, “The novelty of coming to read to a dog was just the motivation some of the children needed. And the dogs loved it. They immediately saw the benefits - lots of attention and treats.” The Potter League has expanded the program to include schools, libraries, after-school programs and most recently, two CFS group homes for boys.

Children who participate in Reading Fur Fun sessions offered through schools and libraries are referred by reading specialists or classroom teachers. The program runs in five-week sessions with each session lasting about an hour. Participating children receive a book to take with them at the end of five weeks.

Sessions offered elsewhere, such as in the group homes, don’t necessarily target children with reading problems. They combine recreation with learning and participation is completely voluntary. At CFS, the volunteer teams visit once weekly on an ongoing basis.

The handler’s role is to facilitate the process. “You know, the dogs really can’t read. The volunteer is there as a tutor, to help out with a word or sometimes to read a book to a young child,” says Mallonee. “We frame it as if the dog is really part of it,” says Mallonee. “We’ll say, ‘Pepper doesn’t know that word either, let’s see if we can figure it out.’” The dog hears its name and listens up and that keeps the child engaged. A first-grader once asked Benson, “If I don’t know a word, can Aspen help me?”

Benefits Beyond Literacy

For children who have had a rough start in life, Reading Fur Fun may benefit them in ways not directly associated with books. “Our boys, they put on a tough exterior, but they’re little boys who are scared,” says Turner. “They’re in a new environment. A lot of our kids come from homes where there might be some kind of abuse or neglect or they’re having behavioral problems. When Aspen comes in, their faces light up - he’s a nice, big, warm dog to cuddle with and hug.” Amy Bettencourt, manager of Family Connections II, adds, “If they’ve had a rough day at school, it helps them to calm down and gives them a chance to show gentleness.”

Turner says the boys enjoy the casual nature of the sessions. “Their day is structured from the time they wake up till the time they go to bed. This is much more laid back. It’s almost like they don’t realize they’re getting something out of it-it’s just fun.”

Safety and Humane Education

Learning to be with Aspen in a safe, comfortable and enjoyable way has helped some of the children who were once afraid of dogs, says Bettencourt. "One of the boys was petrified at first," she says. "We introduced him to Aspen slowly - now I find him looking on the shelves for books to read to Aspen."

The animal safety component of Reading Fur Fun distinguishes it from many other pet partner reading programs. "We felt it was important to emphasize safety with dogs so we built that into our program," says Mallonee.

Benson says she teaches the children how to meet and greet a strange dog. "First you ask the owner, 'May I pet your dog?' Then you hold out a closed fist and let the dog sniff your hand. Then you pat it on the side, never on the head."

The Potter League provides many of the books used in Reading Fur Fun, and program administrators take

that opportunity to reinforce the concept of humane interaction with animals. "Quite a few of our books have a story where an animal is in a shelter so that gives us an opportunity to talk about the shelter and how people treat their animals," says Mallonee.

Costs and Training

Reading Fur Fun is a volunteer program so there are very few direct costs other than the cost of books. The organizations that host the reading sessions are not charged a fee and there is no cost for the individual child. The Potter League does cover the fee charged by Therapy Dogs International, to administer temperament and obedience tests to dogs before they are allowed to participate as reading buddies.

The biggest challenge is finding enough volunteers with suitable dogs. "You not only have to have a really good dog, you have to like children too," says Barton. Even dogs with the right temperament often don't make the cut because their owners haven't spent enough time on obedience training. Reading Fur Fun dogs must be TDI qualified, though they need not be registered with TDI as therapy dogs. The Potter League's obedience training classes are open to everyone and cover all of the elements included in the TDI test.

Selected Book List

- It's Spring (Board Book) - Samantha Berger, Pamela Chanko
- My Dog's the Best! (Hello Reader: Level 1) - Stephanie Calmenson
- Biscuit's New Trick (My First I Can Read) - Alyssa Satin Capucilli
- Go, Dog. Go! (Beginner Books (R)) - P.D. Eastman
- I'll Teach My Dog a Lot of Words (Board Book) - Michael Frith
- Mice Are Nice (Stepping-into-Reading: Step 2) - Charles Ghigna
- Why Do Dogs Bark? (Easy-to-Read: Level 3) - Joan Holub
- Too Many Dogs (Step-into-Reading: Level 1) - Lori Haskins
- If Dogs Ruled the World (Hello Reader: Level 3) - Faith McNulty
- "What Is That?" Said the Cat (Hello Reader: Level 1) - Grace Maccarone
- The Bookstore Ghost (Easy-to-Read) - Barbara Maitland
- Why Benny Barks (Step into Reading: Step 1) - David Milgrim
- Three Stories You Can Read to Your Dog - Sara Swan Miller
- Three More Stories You Can Read to Your Dog
- Three Stories You Can Read to Your Cat
- Three More Stories You Can Read to Your Cat
- Cats Add Up! (Scholastic: Level 3) - Dianne Ochiltree
- Sleepy Dog (Step-into-Reading: Step 1) - Harriet Ziefert
- When the TV Broke (Easy-to-Read)
- A Polar Bear Can Swim (Easy-to-Read)

*This list represents a small sample of the books used in the RFF Program. All books used have been evaluated for their content to ensure that animals are treated humanely.

Martha Parks, director of the volunteer/intern program at Child & Family Services says the agency would like to offer Reading Fur Fun in more of its group homes but so far, there haven't been enough trained teams. "We're just waiting for the right volunteers."

Source URL:

<http://www.connectforkids.org/node/4236>

Links:

<http://www.potterleague.org/>

<http://www.cfsnewport.org/>

<http://www.deltasociety.org/>

<http://www.therapyanimals.org>

<http://www.connectforkids.org>

<http://www.tdi-dog.org/>

Published on Connect for Kids / Child Advocacy 360 / Youth Policy Action Center
(<http://www.connectforkids.org>)