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See Spot Read: Helping Children Build Confidence in Their Reading Skills

Reading in front of other students can be very intimidating for many children, particularly if they aren't confident in their reading abilities. The Wake County, North Carolina organization See Spot Read helps children practice their reading skills by having them read to dogs.

By **Jessica Lyons**



In 2009, certified therapy dog handler Rebecca Hirschfield founded **See Spot Read** so she could take her dog into schools and libraries for reading programs with children. Hirschfield was soon joined by some volunteers and the organization began having meet-up sessions, which are now held on a daily basis. See Spot Read now works at 28 different sites and has 170 members, including more than 50 volunteers. See Spot Read organizer Beth Cooke Weaver explained to Education-Portal.com why reading to dogs can be beneficial to children.

Education-Portal.com: What are the ages of the children you work with, and how do they get involved in the program?

Beth Cooke Weaver: We basically work with children from fifth grade to even children who cannot yet read, motivating and encouraging reading while building self-esteem and self-confidence. We have fun with the children and also help them understand how to meet, greet and be safe with a dog. We do

not 'teach' children to read; we *do* help struggling readers along, but there is no tutoring involved, only encouragement and motivation to keep reading and to enjoy the experience of doing it with an animal. We really have no age limits; it all depends on who the meet-up site would like us to read with. We also work with children who are challenged in different areas, and we always proceed with love and affection.

E-P: Why do you think having children read to dogs is an effective way to improve their reading skills?

BCW: Children benefit greatly from reading with dogs. I have found that the dog's 'handler' disappears to the child while reading; the dog is who they focus on. There is absolutely no intimidation from a dog, and certainly no judgment on how well a child reads from the dog. They accept help from the handler if needed, and the handler is always full of praise for the reader.

We make every attempt to ensure the readers understand what their story is about, and we encourage them to tell us about what they have read. We interact with these children through their books and engage them with their dogs. All children get so very excited when they know they will have an opportunity to sit and read with a dog. They simply cannot wait to do so, and the progress they make in their reading can be amazing. Teachers comment frequently that they have never heard their students read that well before, or that we made their day, that they wouldn't join in classroom activities at all until the dogs came into the school. We have teachers who have commented that they would love to have a dog in every classroom!

E-P: In addition to improving their reading skills, what other skills are children able to develop through See Spot Read?

BCW: They're interacting socially with another adult, learning how to communicate with that adult and to feel comfortable and not pressured in any way. They also learn animal behavior, how to be around an animal and that these animals have feelings and emotions just like they do. It encourages them to be kind and respectful.

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which they carry into interactions with humans as well.

E-P: What are your future goals for See Spot Read?

BCW: Future goals for this program remain the same. Being able to motivate, encourage and build self-esteem and self-confidence in these children is major. They need this from an early age, and we hope it will continue with them throughout their school years and beyond. Reading with dogs in schools and libraries will be something they will never forget.

E-P: How can our readers get involved and help See Spot Read?

BCW: We have wonderful volunteers in this program who give their time freely. We actually have more school demand than we can really cover at this time. It's amazing how many schools would love to have us come in. Your readers can help by encouraging programs such as this one in their local communities. As far as helping this particular program here in Wake County, readers can spread the word about our work and hopefully reach certified dog teams who may not be aware of our program. Give them our site information in the hopes we can gain more volunteers. We are in desperate need of daytime certified dog teams before we can expand our school and library demands much further. This is a wonderful program to be a part of, and our flexibility with volunteering is a plus for our members.

Children aren't the only ones who can benefit from four-legged companions. College students also use [therapy dogs for stress relief](#).



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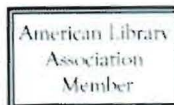
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