

Nomad Editions Good Dog

September 14, 2011

Going to the Dogs
FOR READING HELP



Paws for Reading

With pups at their sides, kids read
books 'til they're dog-eared

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Every week last year, a 7-year-old Maltipoo named Lucy walked the halls of Leesville Road Elementary School in Raleigh, N.C., in search of her 8-year-old pupil. The dog knew her way to the second-grade classroom, and when the name Anotu was called, Lucy's ears perked up.

Anotu was called out of class for 30 minutes every week to work on her reading with Lucy and the pup's owner. The duo volunteers for Bonding, Animals, Reading, Kids and Safety (BARKS), a North Carolina-based nonprofit that uses therapy dogs to help children and adults master reading and speech. Although she was initially chosen for the session because of her below-grade reading level, Anotu's classmates never teased her about needing help. Rather, her Tuesday appointment made Anotu a bit of a superstar among her peers. And naturally, Lucy thought Anotu was a big



Girl's best friend. Eight-year-old Anotu cuddles her reading companion, Lucy.

deal too.

"I was a slow reader," Anotu said at the end of this past school year. "But I like

end of this past school year. "But I like saying the words to Lucy. She sits next to me, and when I'm finished, I say, 'Lucy

I was once afraid of Dog But Now I am Not

Written By -- Leilani B.



turn the page,' and she turns it with her nose."

By late spring, the second-grader could take any book off the shelf in her classroom's library and read it. "She loves to read now, and she did not feel that way when she came into my classroom," Tracey Spruill, Anotu's teacher, said. "Within two months, her reading went up three levels, and her confidence improved."

One of Anotu's literary favorites is the *Biscuit* series, about the adventures of a small yellow puppy, and she said Lucy shares her fondness for books about dogs. She can tell Lucy understands a book because her ears go up and down as Anotu reads. And what if a story is too long? "She turns the pages early!"

An audience that doesn't criticize, rush or tease

Across the country, dogs like Lucy are



Sit and listen. Under the watchful eye of MaryEllen Schneider, co-founder of SitStayRead, a student shares a story with an attentive canine pal.



What happens next? Iris, a greyhound, practices turning pages with her nose. Iris's owner, Jeani Gray, co-founded the BARKS program.

...serving as vehicles to improve literacy. Canine audiences don't mock a stutter, they don't get impatient when a reader lingers over a tough word and they don't laugh at a mistake. Best of all, they don't mind hearing the same story over and over and over.

For the same reasons that dogs are beneficial to all of us — lowering our heart rates and reducing stress — trained therapy dogs of any breed are invaluable in educational settings. They not only help create a low-pressure environment for early readers, but they also work their way into the hearts of these children, boosting their self-esteem.

“The goal is to help children overcome literacy and writing problems and to help them feel relaxed enough to do that,” said Jeani Gray, co-founder and CEO of Helping Paws International, which created BARKS. One of the non-profit’s goals is to enhance kids’ love of reading and help them begin their own personal libraries. Many of the students come from low-income families, so they may not have books at home or grown-ups who can — and are willing to — read with them.

Though no central agency keeps tally on the number of school reading programs incorporating dogs, the groups involved say such efforts are on the increase and that most have some element of one-on-one interaction between a student and a dog-handler team. BARKS defers to teachers, who identify students with the lowest reading scores at the beginning of the year. The teacher selects books at each student’s reading level, and the volunteer brings additional books. After children read with the pup 12 times, they get to pick out a new book for their personal collection. The dog leaves a paw print in each bookplate.

The BARKS’ pups are certified therapy dogs that receive additional training with their handlers for six weeks before being partnered with a student. The program is a type of animal-assisted therapy, which seeks specific and documented outcomes,

rather than an animal-assisted activity, which is typically more casual, such as a visit to a hospital or nursing home.

It’s critical, Gray said, to document progress by logging reading scores at the beginning and end of the program, an opinion echoed by leaders of similar non-profits. Gray’s data shows that BARKS students, for instance, improve an average of two grade levels per year.

One recent study by the University of California Davis School of Veterinary Medicine showed statistically significant improvement among kids who read to dogs. The survey, led by researcher Martin Smith, worked with California third graders in the All Ears Reading Program developed by Tony La Russa’s Animal Rescue Foundation. They looked not only at reading skill but also at a measure related to empathy — research shows that when kids have a positive relationship with animals, that transfers

relationship with animals, that transfers to relationships with humans. Smith found improvements in both areas. In one study, kids went from reading 96 words per minute to 120 words per minute during a 10-week study.

The researchers were surprised to find such improvement, since the interaction, at just 10 minutes a week, was so short, but the upshot was clear. "Any time kids are reading more and becoming more positive about their interaction with animals," said Cheryl Meehan, Smith's co-researcher, "it's a good thing."

Dog gone results

Kids aren't the only ones who love reading to boxers and bulldogs. Teachers and administrators are also fans of these types of programs because they are free, dependable and effective.

"The children are just delighted when the dogs come," said Juliana Perisin,

principal of Hendricks Community Academy, a public school on the south side of Chicago where all but one of its 340 low-income students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The school was the first to host SitStayRead when it was founded eight years ago. The literacy program has a unique curriculum, developed with the University of Illinois at Chicago Center for Literacy, structured so that students read the same text five times during the reading hour.

A volunteer first reads the book to students (called modeling), then the students read the book to their dog partner, followed by choral reading (group all reads together), echo reading (a volunteer reads a sentence aloud, and the students repeat it back in unison) and paired reading (between two students). Also during the hour, the students write a short story about the book's theme. At the end of the eight-week session, each

the end of the eight-week session, each student gets a bound book of his or her writings. The program continues throughout the year without the dogs and focuses on independent reading and guest readers. One guest was an opera singer who read *The Dog Who Sang at the Opera* and talked about why reading is important to his profession.

SitStayRead helps the Hendricks Community Academy reach its literacy goals for comprehension and fluency. "It increases the reading level because the kids are so into making sure they can read for the dogs," Perisin said. "It motivates students more than anything else. They practice beforehand and want to read in a fluent manner for the dogs." A third grade teacher at another SitStayRead school said that after completing the dog program, her students' reading was "off the charts." Last year, none of them failed the Illinois

Last year, none of them failed the Illinois Standard Achievement Test, and some read as many as 50 books — a significant change, she said, from “non-dog years.”

SitStayRead co-founder MaryEllen Schneider said the dogs provide a huge pets-to-world connection for young readers. “They see a dog, read about a dog, touch a dog, write about a dog, even smell a dog. It’s part of the whole child learning where all the parts of the brain are connected.”

Creating a comfortable reading environment

A volunteer handler — usually the dog’s owner — is always present for reading sessions, but in the best cases, they “disappear” during the kid-canine connection. “When we first start a session usually the child is hesitant,” said Shirley May, a retired schoolteacher in Kansas City, Kan., and volunteer for Reading

City, Kan., and volunteer for Reading Education Assistance Dogs (READ). “As the year goes on, they will just talk to the dog and won’t even talk to you. That’s one of our goals.”

Although a volunteer’s role is subtle, it requires substantial training, said Kathy Klotz, executive director of Intermountain Therapy Animals, which is credited with starting READ, the first dog-reading program, in 1999. It now has registered nearly 3,000 volunteer teams in 49 states. “Some people would say just take your dog and let the child read, which is lovely until the child gets stuck.”

If a child is stumped by a word, a volunteer may ask the dog what the word is, putting her ear down to the mutt’s muzzle as though he’s whispering the answer, which she then relays to the child. Others might guide the paw and nails under the words to follow text, reinforcing the idea in the child’s mind

reinforcing the idea in the child’s mind that the dog is fully engaged in the process and is listening to the story.

“We’ve noticed that the kids are always turning the book so the dog can see the pictures,” Klotz said. “They are absolutely convinced the dogs can understand. It goes a lot higher in age than you would imagine. We asked a 10-year-old how he felt about it, and he said, ‘I really liked when the dog was interested in hearing my story.’ They get to feel like a tutor for a change.”

Reading with dogs can have lasting impact. Klotz says one of READ’s original handlers was filmed for a TV segment with “a wild little ADD 10-year old” at a school with enormous problems. “Six years later, she was rendered speechless when she met him coming out of the library,” Klotz says, “where, at 16, he then went regularly to help tutor younger kids with reading.”

In programs like READ, dogs provide a primary motivator, instantly giving kids pleasure from reading, versus a secondary motivator, such as earning free ice cream if they read 10 books.

Once kids understand the joy in reading to a dog, they may open a book in other settings. One student went home and read to a picture of a dog on his refrigerator.

Retired schoolteacher May, who has three certified therapy dogs and meets with 19 students each week, said she works with reluctant readers, autistic readers, children with dyslexia and students for whom English is a second language. Ninety-eight percent of them are bashful or intimidated. "Something is keeping them from reading in the classroom," she said. "We want to make them comfortable readers, and the dogs help create that comfortable environment."

Typically, when May first meets a student, the child will say, "I can't read," and she tells them, "I'm not a very good reader, but James is going to help us." And in his own way, James Brown the Dalmatian does help, even though he's doing little more than being his doggy self.

"The dog does nothing, but the dog is the vehicle by which all this occurs," May said. "You could use this same method without the dog, and I guarantee it wouldn't happen."

Anotu's teacher tends to agree that a wet nose makes all the difference. "The dog helped her because it gave her high self-esteem," Spruill said. "It was a privilege to be called out of class to read to an animal." Spruill said she's not sure if Anotu will have a canine reading partner again this year. "But I'm going to check on her in third grade to make sure her confidence level is still up," she said,

"with or without a dog." ■

About Us

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