

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).

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, 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 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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