

Tail Waggin' Tutors

A Doggone Fun Way to Read!

ANN SIEJKA

Every Monday and Tuesday night, patrons of the Lewiston (NY) Public Library may see some four-footed visitors heading to the children's room, red bandanas around their necks and two-footed friends in tow.

These dogs are part of Tail Waggin' Tutors, a program allowing children to improve their reading skills and develop a love of reading by practicing their skills with caring and patient canine friends.

Some may balk at allowing canine companions into the building--worrying about mess, accidents, allergies, liability, and insurance issues. A few just don't like dogs and don't want them around. All are valid concerns, but many librarians as well as teachers and parents believe that the benefits outweigh the potential problems.

Research tends to agree as can be seen by the results of research conducted by the Davis Veterinary Medicine Extension at the University of California, which found that school children who read to therapy dogs on a regular basis actually improve their fluency by 12 percent. Those children who participated felt more confident in their reading skills and found reading more enjoyable.¹

Research conducted by Vicki Marcelini Dunlap on the available literature of the issue adds further support to the premise that reading to a certified therapy dog improves reading skills and encourages a love of reading, both of which are the goals of children's libraries everywhere.²



A child reads to a canine friend at Lewiston (NY) Public Library.

As the initiator of the program at the Lewiston Public Library, I can verify these findings. Our program is now in its fifth year, and I have witnessed some amazing results. One child in particular, Whit, 7, comes to mind.

During the first year of our program, Whit's parents said he hated to read. It was difficult to get him to read the twenty minutes a night required by his teacher.

In a short time after joining our program, his attitude toward reading shifted. He loved to see "his" dog each week. His reading became more fluent, and his confidence grew. Whit's parents said he would go home from the program and practice reading so he could do a good job the next time he came to read.

By the end of the school year, Whit's reading ability had jumped several levels, and he was excited about reading. His parents attributed this dramatic change to reading with our dogs three times a month.



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Is this program worth defending against those who feel that dogs don't belong in the library or the added effort it takes to coordinate several dogs, varying schedules, and occasional dips in attendance? Definitely!

If we can help even one child learn to love reading, it is definitely worth the time and effort. The program is a valuable resource not only for the children it serves but for the adults striving to find a way to improve their child's reading skills and foster a love of reading.

For those interested in establishing such a program, research and personal accounts of others can be excellent tools used to garner support or allay the concerns of those who may be reluctant to offer their support. So, too, can well-planned program goals, guidelines, and protocols. The following guidelines were developed for our program and are shared in the hopes that they will aid other librarians in developing a reading program for their libraries.

Do your research. Library boards, concerned patrons, and reluctant staff may need convincing. Articles, books, and research that support the benefits may go a long way towards alleviating concerns. Don't overwhelm people with reams of paper detailing dry research reports but definitely prepare to support your program with interesting summaries of your findings. Include solutions to perceived problems.

Contact a national therapy organization. Organizations such as Therapy Dog International (TDI) and Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.), and even your local animal rescue association can provide valuable information, a list of participating therapy dogs and handlers available in your area, as well as concrete information on how to begin a reading program in your library. TDI and R.E.A.D. have such programs available and can provide insurance for the dogs and handlers who participate in such programs.

Develop a detailed plan. To garner support for your reading program, you must develop a detailed plan. How large or small do you want the program to be and how often do you want to meet? What will the rules be for handlers, children, and parents? How formal will the program be? How will you measure success?

Get permission from the director and library board. After you have a plan in place, it is time to garner the support of the governing body of your library. Without the active support of those in charge, you may have difficulty with those opposed to the program.

Interview each dog and handler. This step is absolutely necessary. Remember, these dogs and handlers need to build a bond between themselves and the children they serve. Not every dog or handler works well with children. The success of the reading sessions depends upon the interaction between the child,

the dog, and the handler. If you don't think they will fit, don't invite them to participate. Even those handlers who want to participate may not be right for your program. Don't be afraid to say no.

Choose several dogs and handlers. It is critical to have more than one dog for children to choose from since not every child is comfortable around every dog. Some children are afraid of large dogs; others are not. Some children like calmer, older dogs. Giving them the opportunity to choose from several dogs increases the chances of a successful program. Also, life happens, things change, and dogs and handlers may have to opt out of the program.

Require that each dog is actually a certified therapy dog and a member of a therapy dog organization. This is very important; certified therapy dogs have been tested to ensure they are suitable and insured. In my experience, as long as they are a member of a therapy dog organization and are in good standing (all shots, training, and dues current), they are insured against lawsuits. This is the case with all of the dogs in our program. This protects the library, the dogs and handlers, as well as the children they serve. Also, handlers are trained in the proper protocol and are very careful to follow those rules for the safety and benefit of everyone.

Host an open house with the dogs and handlers present. It is important that everyone meets each other prior to the beginning of the program. Some children are nervous around dogs. Parents want to feel comfortable with those who are in contact with their children. Be sure to provide handouts of the rules and gather contact information.

Conduct a biannual meeting with your volunteers. It is important to meet at least twice a year with your handlers to discuss any issues or concerns you or the handlers may have. It allows an opportunity for offering suggestions and helps to establish a rapport with each other. Scheduling a time when everyone can meet may be difficult, but it is well worth the effort.

Promote your program. Get the word out to the local schools. Utilize a variety of methods of advertising, and don't underestimate the value of word of mouth communication. It is particularly helpful to coordinate with reading specialists, tutors, and teachers who you already know, so networking is important. 🐾

References

1. Melanie Adam, Maria Hertel, Elizabeth Intza, and Patty Mardula, "Reading to the Dogs: A Library's Guide to Getting Started," (website), July 30, 2014, accessed April 14, 2016, <http://readingtodogs.weebly.com/research.html>.
2. Vicki Dunlap, "Canine Assisted Therapy and Remediating Reading: A Review of Literature," (Graduate Paper, Student of Special Education, Northern Michigan University, 2010).