

Dogs and Pigs and Birds, Oh My!

A Bevy of Animals Serve as Partners in Literacy

MARYBETH KOZIKOWSKI

“Living things in the library encourage reading. They certainly provoke questions and conversations with patrons.”

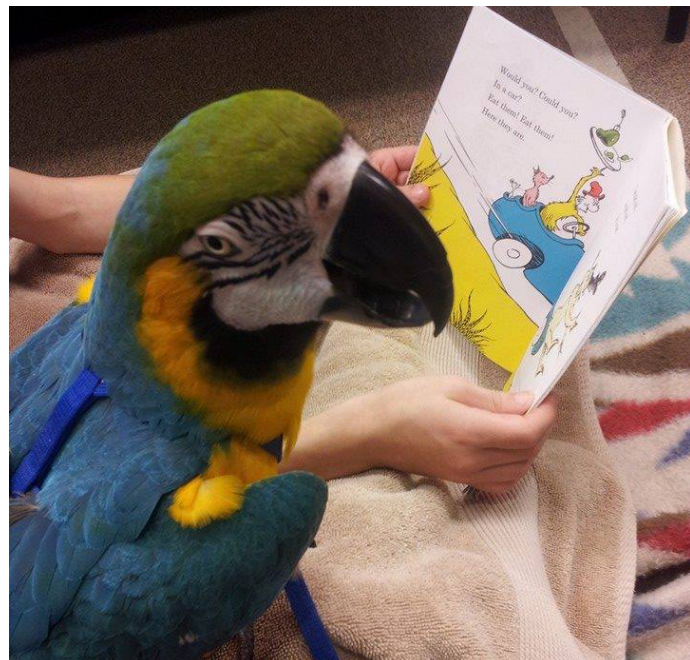
That quote from Kate Capps, children’s librarian and school liaison of the Olathe Indian Creek Library in Kansas, is one that I—and many other librarians—would tend to agree with, based on the number of programs nationwide that encourage kids to read to or with animals.

Animals in school and public libraries are often a regular presence; most have hosted animal programs of one kind or another, and many have resident pets. But how are libraries incorporating creatures that creep, fly, hop, swim, and strut in children’s literacy initiatives? And is there a social or developmental benefit for young library patrons?

Themed displays in support of programs featuring animals or adjacent to a resident pet’s “home” boost circulation and can serve as entry points into literacy. Meredith Richards, librarian at Ohio’s Worthington Libraries said, “The books are often checked out faster than we can keep up with the displays. Usually parents and kids decide together to get the books so they can make the learning experience a family one.”

Programs in which children read to a certified therapy animal are a well-established success story in libraries nationwide. My children’s department has offered Book Time with a Dog since 2001 with dogs trained, certified, and insured through Therapy Dogs International, one of several national organizations that certify therapy animals.

Open to children from grades 1 to 6, our program is intended for children who want to practice their reading aloud skills. But it has additional appeal for young patrons with special needs. One Sachem parent shares, “My daughter’s autism has



Would you, could you, with a bird? Buddy the macaw in action at Red Mountain Library in Mesa, Arizona. Photo courtesy Paws 2 Read, Arizona.

prevented her from participating in many activities her peers enjoy, but Book Time with a Dog suits the needs of children at all functioning levels.”

For librarians interested in starting their own similar program, Ann Sjeka, children’s librarian at Lewiston (NY) Public Library offers this advice: “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 . . . Include solutions to perceived problems.”

More Than Just Canines

Libraries across the country offer opportunities to read to a literal menagerie of certified therapy animals: miniature horses, pot-bellied pigs—even birds. Pam Harrison, supervisory librarian, youth services, Apache Junction (AZ) Public



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Library, said, “[Buddy] the macaw actually sits on the thigh of the child as they sit on the floor with their legs straight out. He really seems like he is listening to the story and sometimes moves his head up and down if he gets excited.”

Library critters go on to include the unusual, exotic, and not-necessarily-certified therapy animals. Darwin and Nancy are resident hermit crabs at the New York Public Library’s 53rd Street Library. Lauren Younger, youth services supervising librarian, notes that the crabs’ aquarium home on the children’s reference desk “builds relationships between staff and patrons” and offers visitors “a different type of library experience.”

From the Barnyard

Playing “mother hen”—literally—via hatching programs is generating patron enthusiasm and reinforcing public libraries’ role as education centers.

Ohio’s Worthington Libraries partners with a local farm educational company for its annual egg-hatching project. This year, the library’s hatchlings attracted about 265 daily visitors, and patrons suggested more than fourteen hundred names for the baby chicks.

Librarian Meredith Richards said, “Helping to care for a life besides their own is a new experience for most young children, and, more than anything else, I hope that these programs are helping children develop a sense of empathy.”

Vicky Hays, early literacy librarian and media mentor at the Poudre River Public Library District in Fort Collins, Colorado, incorporates information about animal care with a clever reminder about the importance of early literacy in their chick-hatching program. “We read lots about how to keep the right temperature and humidity level in the incubator, how to keep those new chicks warm, and our manager even read to the incubating eggs because it’s never too early to begin reading,” she said.

Chicks hatched in the spring at Voorheesville (NY) Public Library return as grown chickens during summer programming to reunite with the patrons who watched them come into the world. “Kids and animals—there’s truly an affinity there,” said Gail Brown, manager of youth and family services. Incorporating animals in library literacy initiatives for more than sixteen years, Brown sees the results. “Nothing motivates a child to read more than to have a genuine interest and to self-select books that speak to this interest.”

Reading with Rodents?

In her article, “Literacy Lessons in One Language Arts Sixth-Grade Classroom: The Year of the Guinea Pigs,” educator Barbara J. Radcliffe introduced two guinea pigs into her



A child working with a therapy dog at Sachem Public Library in Holbrook, New York.

classroom in support of her state’s standards-based curriculum.¹ Students researched guinea pig care and wrote persuasive arguments suggesting names for the animals.

Through their interaction with the guinea pigs, Radcliffe’s students moved from reading avoidance to positive reading perceptions. Over the course of the year, children initiated on their own the transition from reading one-on-one to a guinea pig to reading to each other as peers. Radcliffe said, “They learned to take risks and engaged in literacy learning as they practiced strategies and developed their skills in researching, reading, writing, speaking, and listening.”

“No Live Animals” Policy?

If your library wouldn’t consider any of these scenarios, there are creative options to incorporate animals that don’t require live animals or creatures on the premises.

Mutt-i-grees, a national program uniting children and shelter pets to raise awareness of homeless cats and dogs, does not require animals to be present to operate successfully. The program is flourishing in my library’s teen department. Cara Perry, librarian II, teen services, Sachem Public Library in Holbrook, New York, said, “Animals are a big draw, attracting kids we’ve never seen before, and they provide common ground for kids of different ages who wouldn’t normally socialize with each other.”

Perry and the teen services staff created Mutt-i-grees activities that support a variety of kids’ literacy skills from designing and writing posters encouraging animal adoption to composing letters to state and local legislators advocating support for animal shelters. An added bonus? Teens learn how to contact and draft appeals to their elected officials.

Without setting a hoof in the building, goats, cows, and alpacas are inspiring children to read through public libraries' partnerships with Heifer International, a charitable organization whose mission is to help children and families around the world become self-sufficient through donations of livestock and agriculture.

At the Reading (MA) Public Library, Corrine Fisher, head of children's services, titled a recent summer reading club "Kenya Read?" Children earned fake golden coins for books they read, which they then put into large jars to vote for which domestic farm animal to buy for a needy African family (actual funds were then donated through the Friends of the Library). Fisher admitted that while the kids wanted to see the actual animals, "it was terrific to hear the conversations as kids reasoned out which animal they should help buy."

Goshen (IN) Public Library also partnered with Heifer International for an animal-friendly summer reading club that put philanthropy ahead of traditional prizes as reading incentives. Tina Ervin, head of children's services said, "The kids earned votes for whether we sent small, medium, or large animals. . . . We did not give out any of the small prizes that had previous been in our treasure chest . . . many of the kids had really enjoyed that; only one or two (of 867) who participated complained about the lack." (Funds to purchase the donated animals were raised in partnership with local churches and businesses.)

Partnering with Plush

Stuffed animals are active partners in literacy through my library's PetVenture Kits. Young Sachem patrons can take home Midnight the Cat or Barkley the Dog in a small pet carrier that includes a journal for children to write and draw about their shared adventures. The journal stays with the pet's carrier so children can read about the animal's previous outings with other children.

Plush reading pals were included—by special request—in one library renovation. Saroj Ghoting, early childhood literacy consultant in Newfoundland, Pennsylvania, recalled, "We were renovating our library and were having community focus groups on what should be in the library. I had one for children; they said we should have live animals available at the children's desk so they could come up and read together. The best we could do was stuffed animals, but wasn't that a great suggestion?"

For More Information

Here are a few websites to consult for more information on using animals in your library programs.

- Therapy Dogs International, www.tdi-dog.org
- Mutti-i-grees, education.muttigrees.org
- Heifer International, www.heifer.org
- Paws 2 Read, www.paws2read.org
- Animals and Society Institute, www.animalsandsociety.org

More Than Just Cute

It is generally believed that companion animals and pets have a positive influence on human health,² and that reading to a therapy animal encourages children's learning. But as of yet, specific conclusions have not been drawn, and more research is required.³

With libraries emerging as education centers, let's take the lead in exploring the ways animals encourage our youngest patrons to thrive. ☺

References

1. Barbara J. Radcliffe, "Literacy Lessons in One Language Arts Sixth-Grade Classroom: The Year of the Guinea Pigs," *Middle School Journal* 46, no. 4 (March 2015): 3–8.
2. Jessica Saunders, Layla Parast, Susan H. Babey, and Jeremy V. Miles, "Exploring the Differences Between Pet and Non-Pet Owners: Implications for Human-Animal Interaction Research and Policy," *PLoS ONE* 12, no. 6 (June 2017): e0179494. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0179494>.
3. Sophie Susannah Hall, Nancy R. Gee, and Daniel Simon Mills, "Children Reading to Dogs: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *PLoS ONE* 11, no. 2 (February 2016): e0149759. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0149759>.