

# MAN'S BEST FRIEND AS A READING FACILITATOR

*Donita Massengill Shaw*

*Children love dogs, and who wouldn't want to read to one? In this article, you'll learn how nonjudgmental, patient, furry friends help children with reading.*

*Doogan, a soft-coated wheaten terrier, sits on the blanket awaiting the arrival of a special friend. Heidi situates herself so she can put one arm on Doogan and use the other arm to hold her book. Heidi is learning to read so her fluency is choppy, but this is not important to Doogan. When Heidi shows Doogan the pictures, he looks at them like he is interested, and he listens while she reads the entire story. Afterward Heidi returns to her classroom with a smile on her face and a confidence in her spirit.*

Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.), a literacy support program founded by Intermountain Therapy Animals (ITA), is “a carefully planned reading program that involves collaboration among, at the very least, reading professionals, registered and insured therapy dogs and handlers, schools and/or local library and media specialists, and the families/community” (Jalongo, 2005a, p. 153). The R.E.A.D. program began in Salt Lake City, Utah, with the mission “to improve the literacy skills of children in a unique approach employing a classic concept: reading with a dog” (ITA, 2007, p. 9).

Currently, there are approximately 3,000 volunteer teams serving in 49 of the 50 states, 4 provinces in Canada, and 59 teams in Europe and elsewhere around the world, with registrations increasing daily. Registered teams include a handler and a dog who have been trained, evaluated, and registered as a licensed therapy team. This means the dogs have been tested for health, safety, skills, and temperament. The volunteer handlers have passed a test with their dogs, in addition to a separate test documenting their knowledge about supporting students in R.E.A.D. settings.

In this article, I provide information about R.E.A.D. programs in general. Next, I share perspectives solicited from R.E.A.D. participants, specifically teachers, parents, students, and volunteer handlers. Then I discuss how these practices may

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become a part of your classroom and possible adaptations. Finally, I summarize why R.E.A.D. makes a difference.

### Overview of R.E.A.D.

The powerful influence pets have on people's physical and emotional health has been documented (Lynch, 2000; Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). Substantial research credibility shows the value of using animals in either animal-assisted activity (AAA) or animal-assisted therapy (AAT) (Lynch, 2005; Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). The purpose of AAA is to provide motivation, education, or recreational opportunities that enhance the quality of life (Granger & Kogan, 2006). AAA has three features that distinguish it from AAT:

1. The visits are spontaneous, which means the children are not preselected, and content is not preplanned.
2. Volunteers/providers are not required to keep documentation.

3. No specific treatment goals are outlined.

In contrast, AAT includes the animal as part of a treatment plan with the goal of accomplishing set outcomes (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). R.E.A.D. offers both models. In a public library setting, R.E.A.D. falls under AAA because children read to a dog for one session without documentation or planning; whereas preselected children who read to a dog on a regular basis in a school setting with documentation falls under AAT. This article focuses on the AAT aspect of R.E.A.D. by sharing information that is situated in schools.

R.E.A.D. began in 1999 when Sandi Martin, a registered nurse and ITA board member, contemplated the effect animals have on humans and the need to promote emotionally safe environments for children to develop their reading skills. She proposed that ITA partner with libraries and allow registered teams to listen to children read; this was the beginning of R.E.A.D. Within a short period of time, the R.E.A.D. program was taken to bookstores and schools. Since then, therapy dog organizations across the nation have promoted reading to dogs (Hughes, 2002).

Many anecdotes, such as the following, have been collected since R.E.A.D.'s conception. A 10-year old girl, Naomi (pseudonym), could hardly read, and her reading level was way below that of her peers. When asked to read to Meg [dog], Naomi gave every reason she shouldn't read to Meg. The

dog's handler convinced Naomi to read to Meg, and she chose a 32-page picture book. Meg was listening at Naomi's side through the entire 45 minutes it took to finish the simple book. When Naomi finished, she gasped, "Oh my! I'm finished—I've never read a whole book before, ever in my life!"

Anecdotes illustrate the power of AAT, and their descriptive evidence leaves people with a good feeling.



Although that is important, R.E.A.D. is more than a warm and fuzzy program (Friesen, 2009). Small-scale studies of R.E.A.D. have consistently shown that R.E.A.D. improves students' reading skill and motivation (Heyer, 2007; Martin, 2001). Heyer (2007), who was enrolled in a master's program with an emphasis in reading, met with three children in grades 2–4 who performed "just below grade level" but did not receive intervention from the school's reading specialist. Three other students, comparatively, met with a R.E.A.D. team. Both control (instructed by Heyer) and experimental students (R.E.A.D.) received intervention for 20 minutes per week for a total of 16 weeks. Qualitative and quantitative assessments showed that the students who met with the

### Pause and Ponder

- The author believes there are benefits of the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) program that go beyond being "fun." What aspects of the perspectives or discussion spoke to you or convince you there is value in Reading Education Assistance Dogs?
- Teachers have many students to serve and lack time and human resources to meet all students' needs. In what ways does the R.E.A.D. program help you rethink the role of volunteers in your classroom?
- How can you and your colleagues build an engaging environment that supports students' intrinsic motivation?

*“Although dogs can’t speak, they communicate in so many ways.”*

R.E.A.D. team had slightly higher assessment postscores than the control students. Additionally, the students who read to a dog had higher self-confidence and had gained a love for reading.

Martin (2001) enrolled 10 students, ages 5 to 9, in a R.E.A.D. program. The 10 students individually met a pet partner once a week for 20 minutes during the school year. The students were tested by the school’s reading specialist on nationally recognized assessments. All 10 students significantly improved their reading scores. Their classroom teachers also noticed improvements in self-confidence, involvement in school activities, and decreased absenteeism.

A typical R.E.A.D. session, lasting approximately 20–30 minutes, follows several procedures. On arriving in the room, the handler places a blanket on the floor defining the dog’s space; this is set in an area of the room where there are few interruptions and distractions. The position of the dog on the blanket, typically between the handler and child, can help a child feel connected.

When the child arrives, there is a moment for friendly chatter. Within minutes the student is sitting on the blanket reading to the dog while the pet and handler practice careful listening. If a child struggles with a word, adequate time is given for problem solving, but the handler will help the child without doing the reading for the child.

The handler uses the dog to solicit interaction; one way is to speak for the dog.

For example, “That’s a new word that Doogan’s never heard, can you tell him what it means?” or “Doogan really enjoyed that story. He’d like to hear it again, but this time in your own words.” “Doogan wonders how [the character] felt about that,” or “Doogan wonders what is going to happen next—what do you think?” which the child can answer. Throughout the session, the handler participates enthusiastically and interactively without dominating. At the conclusion of the session, the child has



an opportunity for closure by saying goodbye and giving the dog a treat or hug.

Following is a description of R.E.A.D. through a dog’s eyes. Although dogs can’t speak, they communicate in so many ways. The description is based on a published document (ITA, 2008) but personalized with my own R.E.A.D. experiences. When I get Doogan’s bag (with blanket and books), he knows it is time for school. Immediately Doogan wags his tail and kisses me as I put on my shoes, never leaving my side. As we enter the school, Doogan prances

and is very alert, looking around and noticing every detail as we walk down the school hallway. Once in the room, Doogan readily settles down and begins his work. To him, each child is special. Doogan realizes how important it is to look at pictures and allow the reader to touch him. Doogan is also cognizant that I am right there with him, often looking him in the eye and giving him positive reinforcement.

The blanket is a happy and safe place with no negative corrections to the reader or dog. I am attentive to the reader and him, and I support the reader with the right amount of interaction. In

the photos, you will notice how Doogan and I are interested in the book and helping the reader have a relaxing time. From Doogan’s perspective, I have a positive, friendly attitude toward the reader, him, and everyone in the facility.

### Perspectives

In this article, I’d like the voices of teachers, parents, students, and dog handlers to speak

for themselves. The data for this portion of the article were collected from Desert Rose School District (pseudonym), which is located in the southwest region of the United States. There were 197 students who participated in R.E.A.D. over the course of one school year beginning with 2006–2007 through 2010–2011. A total of 78 teachers of grades K–5 instructed the participating students. Thirteen dogs and their handlers provided the intervention. All participating students, their parents, and teachers were asked to complete questionnaires at the end of the school year. The qualitative data follow. A more

thorough description of the methodology, including demographics, data analysis, and quantitative results, is provided in the online research supplement.

### **The Teachers**

Reading growth. Confidence. Motivation. Envy. These are the keywords that describe what teachers said about the R.E.A.D. program. Following are some specific comments the teachers have expressed.

- Students gained a lot more confidence in their reading orally and with their abilities to effectively use their reading strategies.
- My student went up significantly in his reading (Developmental Reading Assessment) score as well as his confidence in reading and retelling a story.
- Where they were previously reluctant to read, now they view it as enjoyable.
- My students seem calmer after reading with [dog]. They show more understanding to others in our room. They're talking with each other and students in other classes in a more friendly tone and with more details.
- Students who participated were the envy of all other students! It was one program that they actually wanted to participate in and didn't consider it as a punishment or stigma as they sometimes do with other intervention programs.

In sum, the teachers readily believed R.E.A.D. is a viable literacy intervention.

*"I can read with more confidence every time I read to the dog. I feel that I am becoming better at reading."*

One teacher wrote on her survey, "I really love this program because it provides a one-to-one intervention for students who need extra support but do not qualify for other intervention programs." This has significance for educators who are looking for ways to support developing or reluctant readers, but may be limited by resources and time.

### **The Parents**

Parents were happy to have their child participate in the program. Their responses can be summarized with terms similarly mentioned by the teachers: interest, motivation, confidence, and reading growth.

- Participating in this program has brought a joy of reading for my special needs child.
- My child is now more interested in reading and is not afraid to attempt new reading, all kinds of material.
- My son was behind in his reading but with the help of the program my son has advanced from a level 6 reading to almost a 12 and the dogs are a great inspiration to him.
- It has made him a better reader and he has a better understanding of what he is reading. They are not just words because he is convinced [dog] comprehends what he is saying.

### **The Students**

Students enjoyed going to R.E.A.D. sessions. Confidence and comfort are two ideas the students expressed in their responses.

- I can read with more confidence every time I read to the dog. I feel that I am becoming better at reading. Because I feel if I wasn't reading to the dog my reading would not be increasing. I also want to say thank you for your patience when helping me read.
- The dog comforts me when I read her a story. If a hard word comes to me I sound it out. I love reading with the dog and her amazing owner. They are so nice to me and all of the other kids want to read with her and the dog. If I can read with her and the dog every year I would.

### **The Handlers**

Handlers found great pleasure watching children transform as readers before their eyes. This experience and the bonding that occurred made their volunteered time worthwhile. You can visualize the experience as the two handlers share their comments.

- One student told me he had new books, and they were really hard for him because he had not practiced. I encouraged him to try. His response was, "Well it's not hard when I read to the dog."
- One student would always turn the book and point out the important things in the pictures to [dog]. One day [dog] was lying on his back and the student turned the book upside down so [dog] could see the pictures right side up.

### **Classroom Practices**

Several resources are available if you want to learn more about R.E.A.D. For example, you may start by reviewing the website [www.therapyanimals.org](http://www.therapyanimals.org) to gain knowledge of the R.E.A.D. program in general. The website outlines steps to

*“The program’s success comes from registered teams interacting with the child and text.”*

become registered, provides how to find a R.E.A.D. team/workshop, and contains results about R.E.A.D. programs. To request a R.E.A.D. team’s visit to your classroom or school, contact your local registered therapy dog association or a national organization such as Delta Society and inquire if they have R.E.A.D. teams available to serve your school.

Implementing a R.E.A.D. program requires planning and preparation to ensure success. Jalongo (2005a) offered practical advice to educators, librarians, and administrators who wish to have a R.E.A.D. program in their community. She provided 12 practical suggestions on how to implement a R.E.A.D. program:

1. Understand the importance and time commitment for training the dog and to prepare the handler for helping students to read.
2. Gain administrative support and educate your colleagues before launching a program.
3. Address safety and liability issues.
4. Consider the culture of the community.
5. Consider finances. Although most programs are voluntary, purchasing student books are one aspect that grants, donations, or private organizations may support.
6. Determine which children are to participate.

7. Secure parents’ and guardians’ permission before beginning intervention.
8. Address sanitation concerns.
9. Inform colleagues, staff, and families about the program.
10. Prepare children and staff with an informative session.
11. Plan for the dogs’ safety and well-being.
12. Decide how expansive the program may become.

Jalongo’s article provides a great overview of R.E.A.D., and I encourage you to read the article in its entirety.

The title R.E.A.D. clearly mentions the canine species as the focus of AAA/AAT. However, the ITA leaders clearly do not discriminate among other animals. They encourage animal lovers of many species, including birds, cats, or rabbits, to become involved. In fact, Sudanese students read to a donkey.

AAT is more than keeping a classroom pet or having a teacher bring her pet dog to class. The program’s success comes as a result of having thoroughly trained, evaluated, and registered teams interact with the child and text. If a teacher wishes to have a qualified R.E.A.D. team visit his or her classroom, but no teams are available, the value and benefits of R.E.A.D. may be adapted.

For example, if your classroom already has a pet such as a hamster or guinea pig, the students can be encouraged to read to the classroom pet by arranging a blanket next to the cage or possibly holding the animal. The power of animals should not be diminished. A person’s relationship with an animal is one factor that has a moderating effect on stress reduction (Friedmann, Thomas, & Eddy, 2000).

An animal partnered with a tutor who is sensitive to children and their

efforts to read may positively affect students (Jalongo, 2005b). I’d encourage the teacher to find a school volunteer such as a high school student, parent, or grandparent and train the volunteer how to provide responsive feedback when a child reads to a classroom pet. The teacher can prepare a list of questions or comments for the volunteer to use to guide meaningful interactions.

No research has been conducted on a “stuffed animal” pet, but teachers may like to try that adaptation as well. Children can be imaginative and report to the teacher (or volunteer) on their experience reading to a stuffed animal. After the child practices reading to the stuffed animal, the teacher can solicit school staff who become volunteer listeners. It’s a privilege for the child to walk to the cafeteria and read to a food service worker or find the housekeeper or secretary and ask him or her to listen to the child read.

All faculty and staff can be taught how to give encouragement rather than praise. Praise passes judgment on students’ reading, tends to emphasize results rather than the process, and teaches children to depend on others for evaluation. In contrast, encouragement supports students’ efforts and helps them to evaluate their reading without judgment or embarrassment. Volunteers and school staff can learn how to provide sincere and constructive feedback with verbal scaffolding and

*“The power of animals should not be diminished.”*

### Figure Examples of Encouragement Stems

Praise statements typically are comments such as “Good job,” “Great!” or “Nice work.” In contrast, encouragement has four characteristics. Below each characteristic, several examples of constructive encouragement are provided (ITA, 2007, p. 142).

- Teaches children to evaluate their own efforts
  - Was that fun? Why?
  - Are you glad you tried to...?
  - You seem pleased about...
- Does not judge their work
  - I noticed that you were ...
  - Which of these books did you like best?
- Focuses on the process rather than the outcome
  - How did you use \_\_\_\_\_ to do this?
  - It looks like you are working on reading with expression.
  - I see you are looking for more books by the same author.
- Is a private event that does not embarrass children in public or compare them with others
  - Thanks for helping organize the books today.
  - I appreciate that you...
  - Aren't you pleased that you were able to...?

support that reflects the value and importance of reading (Gambrell, 2011). Examples of encouragement are provided in the Figure.

If it is not possible to have a R.E.A.D. team visit your school, it may be possible for a registered therapy team to come to the school to teach children about handling a dog and other related humane topics. The students can “adopt” this dog as a special friend; with the handler’s assistance and time, the dog can be a catalyst for discussions about literacy and books. For example, the students could write a letter to the dog telling him about the text they are reading and the handler could write back with the dog’s perspective about the book. This pen-pal exchange can

be a safe place for students to express themselves without judgment.

Another possible idea is to check with the local public library to determine whether they offer a pet partner experience for children. Encourage your students and their families to visit the library’s program and participate in an AAA setting.

### Reasons Why R.E.A.D. Is Effective

R.E.A.D. is able to deliver the necessary criteria to transform reluctant or struggling readers into willing, confident readers by providing a caring, positive, and supportive arrangement through a dog and handler. Several conditions for learning (Cambourne, 1995) are present

in a R.E.A.D. session. Students are *immersed* in text for 20–30 minutes each week. The students take *responsibility* and have time to use, *employ*, and practice their reading in real ways. Time spent engaged in real reading contributes to literacy growth (Gambrell, 2011). Students make *approximations* without fear of judgment. The handlers provide timely, relevant, nonthreatening *response* through their pet partner while providing high *expectations*.

When the emotional climate is sound, students’ feelings are acknowledged, and positive dispositions are being built while they simultaneously learn concepts and strengthen skills (Katz, 2008). As Melson (2001) said, “Despite most children’s acknowledgement that pets cannot literally comprehend what they are saying, children have the feeling of being heard and being understood” (p. 51). In a supportive and engaged environment, “animal-assisted learning” (Friesen, 2009, p. 106) occurs.

Engagement is at the heart of each R.E.A.D. session. “Engagement occurs when learners are convinced that they can engage and try to emulate without fear or physical or psychological hurt if their attempts are not fully correct” (Cambourne, 1995, p. 1987). In Applegate and Applegate’s (2010) research, they discovered that a number of students were good readers, but disliked reading. The authors stated there is a relationship between engagement and motivation.

*“Engagement is at the heart of each R.E.A.D. session.”*

By providing intellectual challenge and having high expectations for deep thinking, students will become more motivated as readers. Guthrie (2004) said that proficiency is built by participation and engaged reading is “a pathway to achievement” (p. 8). Guthrie, Wigfield, and You (2012) constructed an evidence-based model of engagement and achievement in reading that has four components:

1. Classroom practices such as nurturing student interest and assuring opportunity for learning through authentic reading
2. Intrinsic motivation and valuing reading
3. Behavioral engagement that time, effort, and persistence in reading is productive
4. School achievement showing increased test scores

R.E.A.D. delivers on all four of these components.

Can man's best friend be a reading teacher? No, a dog cannot teach children how to read, but a dog can be an effective reading *facilitator*, whose presence in the reading environment can provide important motivations for children at that crucial early learning phase when they need not only to develop skills, but also to discover the heartfelt joy of reading.

A dog's presence has an amazing effect on changing the tone in the room and the circumstances of the task. The animals are irresistible magnets to the children. The dogs provide comfort and reduce stress (Jalongo, 2005b). In a R.E.A.D. setting, they promote authentic and engaged reading that “sets children's hearts afire with enthusiasm and appreciation for the rewards of reading” (Applegate & Applegate, 2010, p. 232). A canine friend partnered with

a knowledgeable handler is a catalyst for improving students' reading, but more importantly they are a catalyst for helping children “be a reader.”

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

**Online Supplement:** Research Overview.

## TAKE ACTION!

1. Visit the website and become acquainted with R.E.A.D. at [www.therapyanimals.org](http://www.therapyanimals.org).
2. Read Mary Renck Jalongo's (2005a) article, “What are all these dogs doing at school?” Using therapy dogs to promote children's reading practice.” Work through the 12 steps she outlines to prepare for a R.E.A.D. program.
3. Request a R.E.A.D. team to visit your school/classroom.
4. Start with a small program and build slowly. For example, if you become a registered team, you may only be able to volunteer once a month at the library. Don't underestimate the impact you can have in this one monthly session.
5. Begin the program with younger children and then gradually increase opportunities for older children.
6. Remember, the success of R.E.A.D. is the intervention between the child, dog, and handler as they interact with the text and each other.