

Furry reading buddies

A paws-on approach to literacy



Reading with a therapy dog can give a child the confidence he needs to develop a love of reading.

Emma is a wildly popular reading assistant in several North Vancouver schools. Endlessly patient, she never insists that kids sound out a word or pay attention. And as students read, she helps them to hold their book open — with her paw.

A gentle black Labrador retriever, Emma is not your typical pooch. Through years of training with her owner, Mary Brown, Emma is a registered therapy dog. Therapy dogs are assessed for temperament and behaviour, and certified so they can visit schools, hospitals and long-term care facilities. Brown completed the READ (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) course, so she and Emma could help kids read in schools and libraries.

This novel idea was the brainchild of Sandi Martin, a nurse in Salt Lake City, Utah. Now READ has programs internationally, and 41 teams based in BC, Alberta, Ontario and Quebec.

At each school where Brown volunteers, the resource team chooses students who are at least one grade level behind in reading. Brown accompanies students as they each read to Emma for 20 minutes, on a soft, dog-print blanket. “I tell them Emma loves the sound of the human voice,” she says.

A retired special education teacher, Brown likes to “sneak in” some remediation. She’ll say to a student, “I’m a little confused about that last point. How would you explain it to Emma?” Over the year, Brown sees dramatic changes. “I see the spark in kids who used to dread reading,” she says. Children who previously read in a monotone start to use expression. “You can tell they’re really getting into the story.”

“The handler uses the dog as a gentle nudge for learning,” explains Lesley Pulsipher, national READ coordinator. The child feels empowered because she’s teaching the dog. Simply by sitting beside a dog, a child’s blood pres-

sure can lower, she says. “Dogs act as a safe, non-judgmental, non-threatening presence,” Pulsipher adds. “Kids are hardly even aware of the handler.”

For some kids, the benefits extend far beyond reading skills. One grade five student had lived in foster homes, had stopped speaking and was reading at a grade one level. “He started to open up and talk to Emma and me.” And by year’s end, he was reading at grade level. He told Brown, “I love being with Emma, but I don’t think I need you guys anymore.”

Some schools like Dr. J. Edgar Davey Elementary in Hamilton, Ont., are tracking reading score improvements. In 2010, 13 students in grades one and two read with Lily, a giant Leonberger, and her owner, Cindy Hunt, once a week. “Their reading scores improved up to seven levels,” says Karen Koop, the Literacy Improvement Project teacher.

As for Brown, after four years of volunteering, she’s not ready to hang up the leash. “I totally believe this program makes a difference. If you give kids the gift of reading early, they have a gift for life.”

by **AMY BASKIN**

Try this at home

“If your cat or dog is allowed on the couch, turn off the TV, spread a blanket and snuggle together as you read,” suggests Mary Brown, of the Paws 4 Reading team in North Vancouver. Small dogs might stay motivated with a dog cookie hidden in the pages!

More info

- therapyanimals.org/R.E.A.D.html
- canadaguidetodogs.com/dogjobs/wrk_therapy.htm

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