

**Q&A FOR PARENTS  
READ TO A DOG**



**READING IS FUN!**

**READING TO A DOG IS  
MORE FUN!**

**LEARN ABOUT HOW READING TO A DOG  
CAN IMPROVE YOUR CHILD'S  
READING SKILLS**

**PARK COUNTY  
LIBRARY SYSTEM**

## **Why read to an animal? How does it help?**

Reading aloud at any time helps increase a child's reading skills. Reading to someone who listens with respect has the added value of validating a child's confidence, contributing to their self-esteem. We notice that most children turn the book toward the dog so she/he can see the pictures. A hand reaches out for fingers to bury themselves in the dog's coat. The dog rests his/her head in the child's lap or just stretches out and listens. The dog knows even less about reading than the child and is completely nonjudgmental. The dog doesn't know or care if the child misses or mispronounces one word or twenty. Further, here is a chance for the child to act as adult and teacher. This is an opportunity for the child to feel useful and competent, and help someone else understand.

When someone feels their skills increasing a multiplier effect kicks in. Self-esteem blossoms and learning becomes easier. Dogs can help support this process. For children already reading at or above their grade level, dogs give them an excuse to read aloud on a regular basis, thereby further enhancing their skills. For children with reading challenges, dogs can help them surmount reading obstacles and can make the process pleasant. In some situations, dogs can even help achieve break throughs.

## **Are there any educational studies that support the need for such a program?**

The statistics about reading are perennially discouraging. The American Library Association estimates that there are 27 million functionally illiterate adults in the United States. The national "America Reads" program notes that 40% of fourth graders read below their grade level, and that children who don't master reading by the third grade risk falling further behind. If our children are not able to read, they are not able to lead. Or learn. Or progress in our society.

There are a number of organizations who conduct canine reading therapy programs, using various testing procedures to gauge the effectiveness of their activities. In general, these show that: 1) children reading aloud to dogs show no symptoms of stress (increased blood pressure, etc.); and 2) test at higher reading levels after the program than do peers not reading to dogs during the same period lapse. Studies also show that children who suffer from reading problems due to hyperactivity, can concentrate for slightly longer periods when they are trying to read to their canine friend.

If you look at Amazon.com, you will see that they list no less than 2,047 nonfiction titles pursuing the critical skill of teaching reading. Despite this outpouring of attention and concern at every level, we don't seem to be making sufficient progress to turn the tide. Canine reading therapy is not a solution, but it is a useful tool toward helping our children.

## **Do the handlers get special reading assistance training?**

In the Park County Library system we do not require that the handler have formal training, but we offer a lot of tips and guidance on how to help children enjoy the reading experience. The handler is there, not as a teacher, but as a support, generally filling in words that a child can not manage, helping with comprehension when appropriate, and making sure that the child does not tackle books that are beyond his or her skills, books that will be discouraging.

Often the handler will use projection, communicating through and for the animal, to help the child with concepts and to help overcome obstacles. This approach is more appealing to the child and more effective because she or he doesn't feel targeted or pressured. For example, if a child reads a word but doesn't know what it means, the handler might say, "Gee, I don't think Rover has ever heard the word 'interactive' before—can you tell him what it means?" If he knows, great; if he doesn't, the handler can explain the word to the dog with the child learning at the same time. This is less direct and intimidating than, "Do you know what that word means?"

A lot of the magic in this program revolves around letting the child focus on the dog. When the child thinks she or he is helping the dog understand the words and the story, the child gets the empowering feeling of being the helper and teacher—rather than having the whole experience focus on the child's lack of skill. This critical shift in focus makes an incredible difference in the flow of the child's learning processes. It's much more fun to read with a friend who listens attentively, and does not judge, than to read for your teacher, in front of your peers.

### **How does the presence of the handler not interfere in the child-dog relationship or inhibit the child reader?**

It's been documented in many therapeutic settings that when an animal is present in therapy, people tend to forget about the other humans and their inhibitions disappear. It's why they often are considered powerful bridges for people who are suffering the after-effects of emotional or other abuse. Such people don't trust anyone and resist talking about their situations, but when an animal is introduced so is the missing element of trust. Suddenly, they find it possible (therapist still present) to share their experiences.

Something similar happens in the reading setting. The dog provides an uncritical, trustworthy listener. The handler is NOT a therapist but is another supportive, positive, uncritical listener. The handler fulfills a crucial role in the process, in encouragement, helping the reader "help the dog understand"—which the kids are eager to do—it takes pressure off them and helps their abilities flow. They also work with comprehension, using the technique described above.



### **Do the kids tend to respond better to a large or small dog?**

Everyone has a preference in size and breed. We haven't seen anything that universally favors one over another. Small dogs are nice for curling up in laps. Large ones can become cushions or reclining rest spots, or they can lay their head in the child's lap. Both provide sensory stimulation.

### **Have any of the children had negative reactions to the dogs?**

Sometimes children are initially afraid of dogs, particularly big ones, but we can always help them get to know each other and overcome their fears. We never force any interaction, of course.

### **How do the dogs feel about participating?**

We only use dogs who enjoy the process. Some dogs are not child-friendly, finding their small size and, often, jerky movements frightening or off-putting. Those dogs obviously do not participate in the program. It's critical for the dog to look forward to therapy sessions and to like working with children.

### **Are all of our dogs certified therapy dogs?**

In the Park County Library system, they are either currently certified or are working toward certification. All of our dogs have been tested extensively in situations involving children. All of our dogs have had basic obedience training. All of our dogs have their shots up to date and appear for their sessions clean and well-groomed.

### **What about allergies?**

Per above, our animals are scrupulously clean and well-groomed before each session, which helps. But this program may not be right for children suffering from dog allergies, although we do have at least one standard poodle in the program—the poodle coat is generally non-allergenic. If there is any question at all, however, this is a matter to discuss with a doctor.

### **How do I select appropriate books to read?**

The librarians will help select appropriate books in the right reading level for the child's age and ability, making sure that the child has an interest in the subject matter. Book choice is critical in giving the child a positive reading experience—not too easy, not too hard.



### **How long are the sessions? How often should the child participate?**

We keep the sessions to about 15 minutes. This provides plenty of time for the child to interact with the dog and to get a good reading experience without tiring of the effort. Presuming that the child reads to the dog once a week for a full month, this is a solid hour of individual reading aloud.

Consistency and the building of a trusting relationship are essential to the therapeutic process. When those things are established, the children know they have something to count on and want to rise to the occasion, too, and make sure they don't miss their appointments. Less often makes it hard to establish a pattern and have them remember and look forward to it.

### **Does the handler ever read to the child and the dog?**

Yes, but not as part of this program. Therapy dogs sometimes attend "story time" sessions during the summer reading programs.

### **What kind of an environment do you set up for these sessions?**

The environment is comfortable and semi-private—a bit out of sight and earshot of the others. The reading kids have floor chairs and a quilt that defines a space for their dog. Positions vary, depending on the three parties involved (child, dog, handler). Sometimes they're down on their tummies, sometimes the dog has his head in the child's lap, sometimes the child reclines on the dog.

### **Should the parent participate in the sessions?**

The dynamics of the dog/child relationship rely on minimal intervention by parents, siblings, and friends.

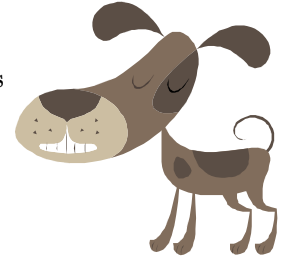
The parent is very welcome to bring a chair and sit nearby, listening quietly. The addition of siblings may not be quite so positive since they often find it difficult to sit quietly and listen. Younger children seeking attention, diverting the dog, and distracting the reader tend to interrupt the reader's concentration and interfere in the dog-child relationship.

### **Do the sessions begin/end with a time to just chat or play with the dog?**

Absolutely—it's very important to warm up for the session and assess the child's emotional

state, how he is feeling about the dog, etc. Talk about what a therapy dog is; talk about the dog—his breed, where he came from, what he enjoys; talk about the incentives, like earning books; learn a bit about the child. And it's important to have a break at the end, maybe let the child offer a treat to the dog, let the dog do a trick or two.

That said, we do try to keep our focus on reading, not on playing tricks or catch or otherwise getting too far off base, which is often very tempting for everyone.



### **Does it matter if the dog isn't always attentive?**

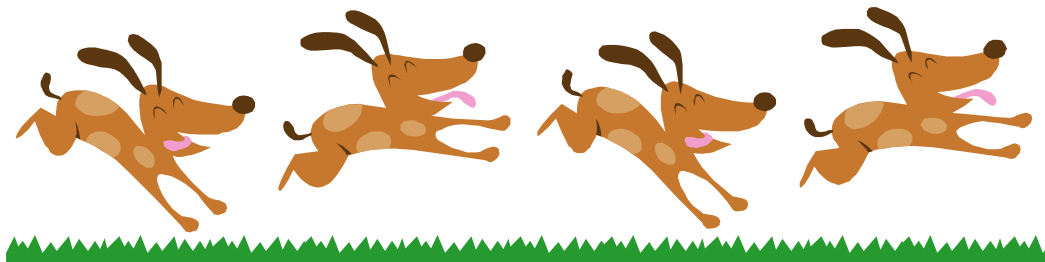
If the dog is restless, moves around a lot and tries to get up frequently, we take a potty break or offer a drink.

When a dog falls asleep during a session, sometimes we tell the child that he is just closing his eyes so he can concentrate better on the story. If the dog starts to snore, this doesn't always work! In that situation, one handler told the child that she should feel very proud, because she always read a story to her dog at bedtime to help him go to sleep, and she had managed to be just as effective. The next time it happened, the little girl looked up at the handler with a shy and glowing smile, saying gently, "I read Buster night-night!"

We try to teach the dogs a "focused attention" command (e.g., "Look!") to get them to look straight at the book. This is effective. But the children get a lot of satisfaction from reclining against the dog, having their arm around him, or just petting and stroking while reading—he doesn't have to be paying attention every moment for the good things to happen.

### **Is there any reward system in place for progress goals to be met by the children?**

Yes. After they've completed ten sessions, the reader get to choose a new book from our collection to keep for their very own, and their dog "pawtographs" it for them.



**Read to a dog  
Monday–Thursday  
3:30–4:30  
at the  
Park County Library  
in  
Cody, Wyoming**



**Adapted from the Read-  
ing Assistant Therapy  
Dogs Q&A Handout**