

Chapter 48

A Furry Partnership

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes the partnership between the Bedford Public Library and an elementary school. This partnership consists of a program designed to assist grade school children with literacy skills. Third grade students read aloud to a Pet Partners team made up of a therapy dog and a handler who is a professional public librarian. The team visits the school weekly with books selected from the public library's collection to provide animal assisted therapy. School staff and teachers collect and provide assessment data on students to create goals and track progress for the students. The librarian, teachers, and school staff work together to create new methods of assessing progress attributed to reading to the dog. During the summer months, the Pet Partners team visits a local Summer Meals site to help address the problem of summer reading loss. Children of all ages are invited to read aloud to the team to participate in animal assisted activities.

INTRODUCTION

“Bridget! Today is our school day. We’re going to read with the kids!” I tell the Golden Retriever, who jumps to her feet and heads for the door. When we leave the Library building, she leaps eagerly into the car, and as we approach the elementary school, she stands up on the car’s seat in anticipation. We head into the school building to read with the third grade students who are waiting.

Bridget and I are a therapy dog team focused on helping children love reading. We are part of a unique partnership between our public library and our local school system, designed to help improve literacy in our community.

Since 1999, therapy dogs have been used to help children with reading. Reading aloud can be a very stressful experience for children, but research has found that just the presence of a friendly dog can reduce children’s stress levels. When children read to a trained therapy dog and handler, not only are they more relaxed, but over

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time, their reading fluency improves. Therapy dogs also provide comfort, reinforce learning, motivate speech, stimulate the senses, encourage positive social behaviors, foster feelings of safety and acceptance enhance self-esteem, decrease loneliness, provide the opportunity for touch and for nurturing, inspire people to smile, laugh and have fun, and offer unconditional love and acceptance (R.E.A.D., 2010). When children read to dogs they start coming to school more consistently, volunteering to read aloud in class, being late less often, turning in more homework assignments, and forming trusting relationships (R.E.A.D., 2010). Although this is a new idea, it is growing rapidly with the number of trained therapy dog teams and programs increasing nationwide.

The Bedford Public Library has endeavored to create its own such program, but in a unique way. Most 'Reading Dog' programs take place either in schools or public libraries. In most library programs, volunteers bring their therapy dogs to the library for informal reading sessions. In schools the programs are more structured, but also generally use volunteers. However, in this program, I am working both as a professional librarian and therapy dog teammate to bring the program to the school. There, we partner with school teachers and staff to work with each student and to document and assess each student's progress.

This program is made possible because of a long-term partnership between our library and the local school system. The Library's administration has long considered partnerships to be important. However, recent economic events in our area have made partnerships even more vital. Lawrence County, Indiana, has been hit hard for the last several years by a wave of job losses, which has dramatically changed the lives of many residents. This has added to the number of adults and children whose lives are increasingly confusing and stressful. This situation has made learning more problematic for many children.

We've all heard how higher education and literacy skills are increasingly important for fu-

ture American workers. This contrasts with the sobering statistics we frequently see about U.S. students' poor test scores. Meanwhile, many American children live in poverty and in family situations that make learning and high achievement even more difficult. Our community is no exception. In response, the Bedford Public Library has implemented a variety of programs to address the community's needs. Many of our programs involve partnerships with other local organizations.

Our program began its first full school year in the fall of 2010, and so the program is very much in development. It has two components, which make it a year-round endeavor. During the academic year, we provide animal-assisted therapy at one elementary school. During the summer, we provide animal-assisted activities at a Middle school.

This chapter will describe how the program was created and how it functions. Background information will be included about the increasing use of dogs to help children. I will discuss future plans and recommendations and suggest that programs like this have a role in addressing children's literacy, an important issue facing communities, schools, and public libraries today.

Definition of Terms

Accelerated Reader (AR) is a software program designed to interest students in reading books outside of class (<http://www.renlearn.com/ar/>). Students select a book to read, and then take a test that assesses their comprehension of the book. Points are awarded based on the book's reading level and correct answers. Schools use this software to create enthusiasm for reading by rewarding students for points accumulated throughout the semester.

Animal Assisted Activities (AAA)

Animal Assisted Activities provide opportunities for motivational, recreational, and/or therapeutic

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