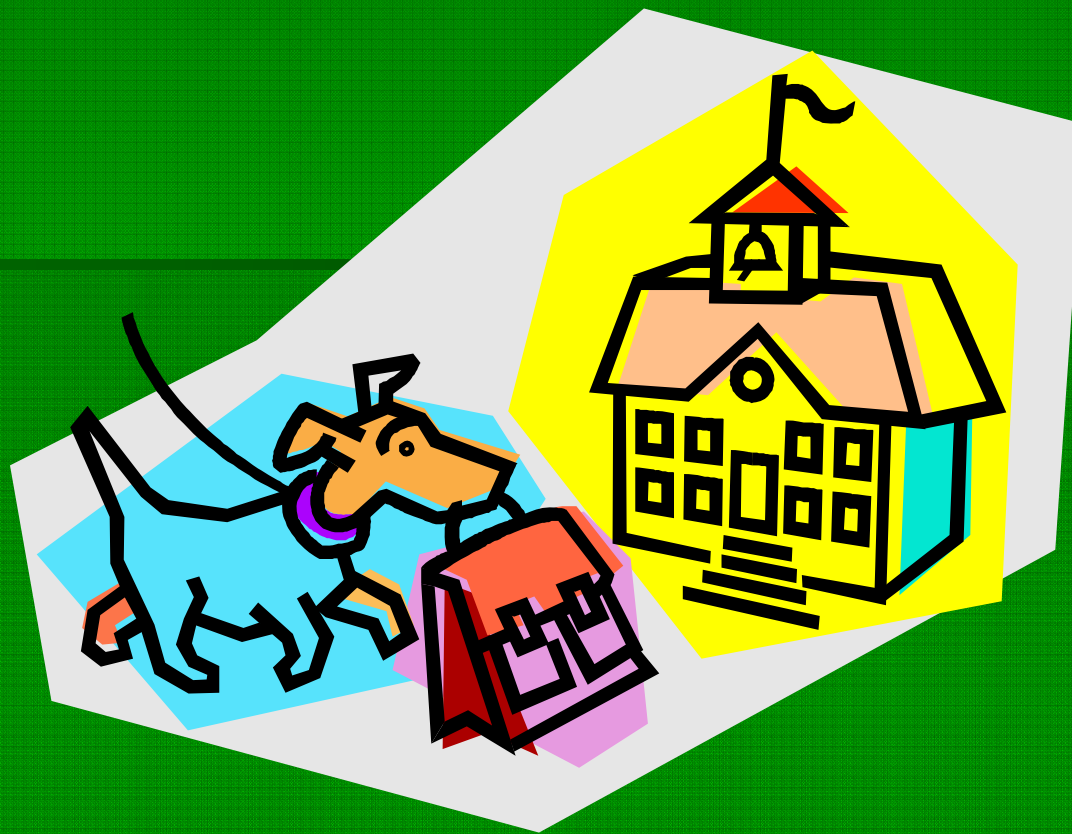



PAWS TO READ

A Practical Approach



What is “Paws to Read?”



 **“Paws to Read” is a program that pairs licensed therapy dogs with children who need more confidence in their reading skills.**

 **It can be held in a public library or school library.**

 **It can have one dog and a small group of children or several dogs and a larger group of children.**

 **It is a popular program that is gaining acceptance across the nation and internationally.**

Why is early literacy important?

Dr. Chris Borgmeier, an assistant professor in special education at Portland State University, said successful reading in the early grades is the most important predictor of future academic and life success.

How can Paws to Read help?

The theory is that struggling readers might be embarrassed to read in front of a class or even a teacher but that the dog provides a comforting, nonjudgmental audience. The children really enjoy reading to the dog, and their families have seen attitude and academic improvements.



A young boy learns how to properly greet Belle, with fingers curled under.

Reading Education Assistance Dogs, a program that began in Utah, helps children by allowing them to read to a non-threatening partner. The young readers can use the experience to boost their confidence without the scrutiny of an authority figure such as a teacher or parent. Many children lose their apprehension about reading when they feel as if they're doing it for the benefit of their animal friend.

[T]he freedom to make mistakes is important to children just learning to read. For parents and teachers, you have to do it right. You can just be comfortable and have fun with the dogs.



The pilot thirteen-month program started in conjunction with the Intermountain Therapy Animals of Salt Lake City in 1999 had extremely positive results. All of the children who were reading below grade level before beginning the program raised their reading two full grade levels with some of them raising their levels as much as four grades.

Similar findings pertained in the Carolina Canines for Service project. Fifteen second-graders who tested below grade level for reading fluency and on reading tests were paired with a therapy dog and handler once a week for 20 minutes throughout the school year, and most of the children improved their reading skills by at least two grade levels.

Why does this work?

Empirical research supports the contention that the presence of mellow companion animals tends to reduce stress. Physiological measures such as a reduction in heart rate, lowered blood pressure, and other observable signs of anxiety reveal that interacting with a dog can moderate stress.

Animal-assisted therapy is founded on two principles: children's natural tendency to open up in the presence of animals and the stress-moderating effect of an animal's calm presence. Research estimates that over 70% of children of all ages do tend to talk to and confide in animals.

With over 100 years of research, there is a growing understanding of the benefits of animal-assisted therapy.

[T]he presence of a calm, attentive dog apparently moderates the stress responses more than the presence of an adult and even more than the presence of a supportive friend when children were reading aloud.



What is the difference between animal-assisted therapy and animal-assisted activity?

Animal-assisted activities are offered to a group of children on a short term basis (more likely a library program) and animal-assisted therapy is planned for individuals as part of a curriculum (more likely a school program.)

Main characteristics of a well-run “Paws” program.

- **Planning**

- **Certification and Insurance**

- **Programming**

- **Flexibility**



Planning

 **What are some concerns that need addressed before the program can begin?**

 **Sanitation**

 **Safety**

 **Other dogs**

 **Allergies**

 **Cultural differences**

 **Fear of dogs**

Planning

 **Who should you talk to before you begin?**

 **Administrators**

 **Staff**




 **Registered therapy dog organizations**

 **Children**

Therapy Dog Organizations

- ❏ **Therapy Dogs, Inc.**
- ❏ **HABIC (Human Animal Bond in Colorado)**
- ❏ **Therapy Dogs International, Inc.**
- ❏ **Delta Society**
- ❏ **Intermountain Therapy Animals**

Certification and Insurance

-  **Pets from home are not acceptable for this type of programming.**
-  **Registered therapy dogs have gone through extensive obedience training, are specially selected for their gentle demeanor, and must pass a test before earning their credentials**
-  **Members of the registered therapy dog organizations are covered by liability insurance through their yearly dues.**

Programming

Things to consider in your program

-  Time of day/day of week

-  Location

-  Book selection

 -  Is it age appropriate?

 -  Is it reading level appropriate?

 -  Include books with an animal theme.

 -  If possible, give a book away after a certain amount of time spent reading to the dog.

-  Alternate activities for those waiting



**A young girl waits
her turn to read to
a live dog in our
homemade
“doghouse” with
our friend, the
fuzzy dog puppet
“Buddy.”**

Flexibility

- ❑ **Number of children who attend**
- ❑ **Number of dogs who attend**
- ❑ **Registration or Open?**
- ❑ **Siblings: Too young to read?**
- ❑ **Inexperience with animals**



Unexpectedly large crowd!

Minor points

- **Enforce a no food or drinks policy to avoid distracting the dog.**
- **Provide comfortable and semi-private areas for the children to read. Large pillows or reading mats are good additions.**
- **Allow the parent to read with the child if the child is comfortable, but encourage separation.**
- **Let first-time participating dog owners know that they have a no-pressure role in the reading.**

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