

See Spot Read

Mix dogs, books, and kids together for great reading.

BY JAMES McCOMMONS



If a child in your family struggles with reading, you should know about the beneficial effects dogs can have on that child's ability to learn.

A few years ago, when Andrew Lafoon was learning to read, his parents discovered he had learning difficulties. "I'd take out the phonics books, and he couldn't remember what he'd learned the day before. He would get really upset," recalls Lisa Lafoon, of Midlothian, Virginia. "I was concerned because I didn't want reading to be a bad experience for him."

Then one day at the library, Lisa and her boys saw a remarkable sight—a child curled up with a dog, stroking its head and reading the animal a book. It was the first Lisa had seen of the Read to Rover program, in which early readers read aloud to a therapy dog—one trained to sit quietly and accept a stranger's touch. A dog handler lingers nearby, but the children are essentially one-on-one with the dog, who, of course, is a noncritical listener.

Andrew loves dogs, and Lisa thought this might get him back to those phonics books. In the ensuing weeks they selected books and phonics flash cards, and practiced at home during the week. Then Andrew read those

materials to the dog. "He worked hard because he wanted to be ready to read to the dog. It turned his motivation around 180 degrees," she says.

Each week, thousands of children in early primary grades read aloud to certified therapy dogs in libraries, elementary schools, and day care centers. In different locations, the program is known as Reading to Rover, Dog Day Afternoons, and Paws to Read—but all grew out of the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) program begun in 1999 by Intermountain Therapy Animals of Salt Lake City.

"We were looking for a way that therapy animals might encourage literacy," says Trisha Clifford, the organization's national R.E.A.D. team coordinator. "It is a novelty, but it works. It's a fun way to make reading more enjoyable for children."

R.E.A.D. now has about 2,000 teams of volunteers in 49 U.S. states, Canada, and Europe. Learn more about it by visiting therapyanimals.org.

Even if you don't have a child in need of these services, perhaps you wonder if your dog could lend a hand. Or an ear.

In Richmond, Virginia, Donna Henley certifies dogs through a chapter of Caring Canines Inc. A reading dog, she says, must sit still for long periods, not bark, and be able to tolerate unfamiliar sights, sounds, smells, and environments. Dogs and handlers take a six-week certification program.

"A lot of people think their dogs can do this, but it takes a certain temperament," she adds. "Older dogs often work best." Handlers are trained to help children—particularly those afraid of animals—work with the dog, and they occasionally pronounce a difficult word for the child or offer encouragement. But most remain silent, says Henley, who takes her three dogs into elementary schools.

"I'm mostly a confidence builder and big cheerleader to the child," she explains. "Usually, I take my knitting and listen to the story, too."

Children get about 10 minutes to read with their furry pal. They may lie next to the dog, curl up with it in a chair, or hold its head in their lap. "It's really special to watch the children react to the dog," Henley says. ☺