

# WHEN READING GETS RUFF

## Canine-Assisted Reading Programs

Holly B. Lane ■ Shannon D.W. Zavada

*Some children find reading difficult, frustrating, and embarrassing. Reading to a caring and cuddly canine companion can make the activity enjoyable and motivate even the most reluctant reader.*

“Outside of a dog, a book is a man’s best friend.”  
—Groucho Marx

Mrs. Holden (pseudonym) heard a quiet laugh from one corner of the room and looked over to see a familiar sight. Nicholas (pseudonym), a once reluctant reader, was happily sharing a book with his best friend in the class. Radar, Mrs. Holden’s reading dog, was sitting quietly next to Nicholas as the boy pointed to words in *The Adventures of Taxi Dog*, ears perked to listen. During group activities, Nicholas was often self-conscious of his abilities; he rarely volunteered to read anything to the group. Now, sitting in the safety of his companion, the boy’s voice flowed with confidence as he turned from page to page.

The teacher had seen Nicholas carefully pick out *The Adventures of Taxi Dog* earlier that day. When asked why he chose it, the boy had thoughtfully replied that he knew Radar liked books about dogs, and he was sure this was another one he would enjoy. This was a typical response in Mrs. Holden’s class; all the children eagerly anticipated their daily opportunity to read to Radar. She knew that he was a friendly, nonjudgmental audience for her students,

but the children had no idea that by reading to Radar, they were practicing their skills and increasing their fluency. All that mattered to them was that they had a kind, furry companion who listened. Mrs. Holden smiled to herself, glad that the popular canine was a member of her class.

### What Is Canine-Assisted Reading?

Canine-assisted reading is a form of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) or animal-assisted activity (AAA) in which children read aloud to a specially trained dog (see Figure 1). AAT is defined as a goal-directed intervention developed and provided by a health or human service professional with expertise within the domain of their profession along with an extensively trained animal. In contrast, AAA can be delivered in a variety of environments, including group settings and one-time events; unlike AAT, AAA is not targeted to an individual’s needs (Gammonley,

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Howie, Kirwin, Zapf, & Frye, 1997). Canine-assisted reading programs can take either form.

In 42 states and the District of Columbia, AAT and dog-assisted reading programs have been found in schools, universities, public libraries, recreation centers, and even hospitals (Aiken, 2012; Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2012; Jalongo, 2005; Land of PureGold Foundation, 2013; Williams, 2011). These programs usually center on giving struggling or reluctant readers opportunities to read books to a canine companion. Children who usually feel self-conscious reading to an adult or peer happily read to a dog, perhaps because they know that dogs will not judge them or make them feel bad about themselves. Goals of canine-assisted reading programs include increasing reading fluency, increasing motivation to read, providing encouragement for reluctant readers, and making reading



fun. Most programs are run by organizations dedicated to dog-assisted therapy, and dogs are specially trained for this purpose.

### What Does the Research Say?

According to Friesen (2010a), “an emerging body of research exploring animal-assisted literacy programs suggests that companion animals, and dogs in particular, are thought to provide a non-threatening yet socially supportive and interactive audience for children when practicing their oral reading skills” (p.22). Documentation of animals being used for purposes other than domesticity has been found from as early as the 1700s (Hooker, Freeman, & Stewart, 2002). Study of their use in professional settings, however, did not take place until the middle of the 20th century. Today a variety of therapeutic approaches incorporate animals, such as dolphins, horses, and dogs, into daily programming as a result of the growing body of evidence suggesting the psychological

and physiological benefits (Bender & McKenzie, 2006; Brodie & Biley, 1999; Wermer, 2008).

The term “pet therapy” was first coined by child psychiatrist Boris Levinson in 1961 (Levinson, 1997). After working for an extended time with a young patient, but making little progress, Levinson presented his dog, Jingles, during a session. He found that the boy responded to therapy much more when the dog was present. The first articles and book on the subject, *Pet-Oriented Child Psychotherapy*, was penned by Levinson in 1969, with a dedication to Jingles, his “co-therapist” (Levinson, 1997).

Since then, research on AAT has been shown to yield a variety of benefits. Many studies have found that the presence of dogs produces positive social and psychological effects (e.g., Corson & Corson, 1987; Corson, Corson, Gwynne, & Arnold, 1977; Johnson, Meadows, Haubner, & Sevedge, 2008). Research has also found pets to have emotional and social benefits such as quelling anxiety, facilitating coping, and reducing the perception of discomfort for a wide span of ages and populations (Friendman, Katcher, Lynch, & Thomas, 1980; Mushel, 1984; Robbins, 2006). Attachment to pets has been linked to happiness, contentment, and support (Ory & Goldberg, 1983; Garrity, Stallones, Marx, & Johnson, 1989; Mugford & M’Comisky, 1975).

Publications confirming positive effects of canines in medical, therapeutic, and educational settings relay a message that calm and well-trained dogs are a particularly powerful tool in supporting the physiological needs of humans (e.g., Beck & Katcher, 2003; Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004; Johnson, Odendaal, & Meadows, 2002; Nimer & Lundahl, 2007; Sable, 1995;

### Pause and Ponder

- Would a canine-assisted reading program be of value in your school, classroom, or library?
- What would you hope to accomplish with such a program? Which readers would you target, and what would you hope they got out of their participation? How would the program fit into your curriculum and schedule?
- What steps would you need to take to set up a program? With whom would you need to communicate before getting started? How would you prepare your students?
- Are there local dog-oriented organizations in your area that might be a good source of volunteer dogs and handlers?

Williams, 2011). Petting and having interactions with familiar dogs can produce lower blood pressure rates, improve cardiovascular health, and result in calming effects in people of all ages (Baun, Bergstrom, Langston, & Thoma, 1984; Friedmann, 2000; Katcher, 1982). One study found that the heart rate and blood pressure of children decreased when they were in contact with a dog while reading (Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, & Messent, 1983).

Psychologically speaking, dogs provide a general sense of unconditional support, comfort, and happiness to those around them. People who are routinely around animals describe feeling an elevated sense of emotional well-being (Sable, 1995). Filiatre, Millot, and Montagner (1986) found that when young children who were normally shy or rejected by their peer groups were regularly around dogs, they felt more confident and increased overall communication when in contact with the animal. Instead of being seen as a canine, children relate to animals as being simply friends (Levinson, 1969).

For many struggling readers, reluctance to practice literacy skills comes at least in part from a fear of failure or embarrassment (Stringer & Mollineaux, 2003). Dogs offer a quiet, listening, and nonjudgmental audience for children (Friesen, 2009). In a qualitative study at Dominican University of California, Kaymen (2005) focused on the SHARE a Book program, a pilot animal-assistance reading program. Four third-grade students who were identified as struggling readers regularly spent time reading to a poodle from the program and then were interviewed about their perceptions of reading aloud to the SHARE canine. The study revealed that the

*“Canine-assisted reading programs can provide struggling and reluctant readers with an enjoyable and nonthreatening activity in which reading practice seems less painful.”*

children viewed reading to the dog as a motivating, enjoyable, and exciting experience.

According to Bailey (2010), researchers at the University of California–Davis have conducted a series of studies of the All Ears Reading program, a dog-assisted therapy program developed by Tony La Russa’s Animal Rescue Foundation, in which children read regularly to three shelter-rescued dogs. In one study of third graders in a public school setting, reading fluency improved by 12%. In a second study, home-schooled children visited the university’s campus weekly with their parents over a 10-week period. During each visit, the children read to a dog for 15–20 minutes. The children’s reading fluency improved by 30%, and 75% of the parents reported that their children read aloud more frequently and with greater confidence after the study was completed. Another study of home-schooled children found increases in fluency, as well (Smith, 2010).

One of the keys to improving reading proficiency is providing plentiful opportunities for reading practice (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). When children struggle in reading, they often avoid reading, and therefore, they get insufficient practice to improve. This results in an ever-widening gap between good readers, who keep getting better through practice, and poor readers, who stagnate because of lack of practice (Stanovich, 1986). Canine-assisted reading programs can provide

struggling and reluctant readers with an enjoyable and nonthreatening activity in which reading practice seems less painful (Kaymen, 2005). Griess (2010) found that canine-assisted reading increased the amount of time students with learning disabilities spent reading.

Reading Education Assistance Dogs (READ), one of the first canine-assisted reading programs in the United States, was founded in 1999 by Sandi Martin of Intermountain Therapy Animals in Salt Lake City ([www.therapyanimals.org](http://www.therapyanimals.org)). READ began its work in public libraries, but before long, the program had expanded into elementary schools.

Martin (2001) conducted pilot studies to assess the effects of the program and found that children who participated experienced a wide range of benefits. In addition to improved reading performance, the children were more confident, completed their homework more regularly, reduced school absences and tardiness, and demonstrated strong empathetic relationships with the dogs. More recently, Shaw (2013) found that all parties involved in one READ program recognized its benefits. In her study, teachers were pleased to have a new way to support reluctant readers, students expressed more confidence and comfort with reading, parents noticed the increased motivation in their children, and the dogs’ handlers enjoyed watching readers develop.

*“When the child came to a word he didn’t know, Jackie ‘helped’ by putting her paw over one part of the word at a time.”*

READ remains the largest and most widely recognized canine-assisted reading program, but since this program began, other similar programs have popped up in libraries and schools across the country. For example, in addition to the previously described All Ears Reading and SHARE programs in California, other successful dog-assisted reading programs include Reading With Rover in the Seattle area ([www.readingwithrover.org](http://www.readingwithrover.org)); Literacy Education Assistance Pups (LEAP) in Delaware ([www.leapreading.org](http://www.leapreading.org)); Sit, Stay, Read! in Chicago ([www.sitstayread.org](http://www.sitstayread.org)); Canine-Assisted Reading Education (CARE) in the Washington, DC, area ([www.nctdinc.org](http://www.nctdinc.org)); and Paws to Read at Arlington Public Libraries in Virginia ([www.library.arlingtonva.us](http://www.library.arlingtonva.us)).

### **Some Real Reading Dogs**

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the benefits of canine-assisted reading programs is to share examples of real dogs and their handlers. The three examples presented here represent different approaches and the wide range of possibilities for program implementation.

#### **Primary Classroom: Florida**

One way to use animal assistance is through classroom-based programming. An example of one effective model is from the Tampa, Florida, primary classroom of Shannon Zavada (second author). After learning about programs

such as READ, Shannon determined that a similar program would be beneficial for the students in her classroom. Many of them were reluctant readers and demonstrated below grade-level literacy skills. She decided that a dog could be just the thing to spark their interest in books.

She looked for information about programs in her area, but with no programs available locally, she decided to create her own. Shannon contacted the administration of her school with the idea to allow a reading dog, supplying them with articles and information about how dogs can improve learning. Although the principal of school was not familiar with the idea, she read through the information compiled and was impressed with the creative approach to learning. She contacted the district office about the idea and received approval to go forward.

Shannon’s golden retriever, Hope, was a recipient of the Canine Good Citizen certificate from the American Kennel Club (AKC). To earn this certificate, Hope had to pass a multistep test of basic good manners for dogs. Hope had also gone through extensive behavior training and loved being around children. She visited the school and classroom several times before her final placement to ensure that the dog was comfortable being around such large groups of people. She seemed to be a perfect match for the classroom.

Before bringing Hope onto the site full time, Shannon collaborated with

the administration to create rules and procedures for the dog. The primary focus was safety of all students. She met with faculty to describe her goals for the program and inform them on how it was to be implemented. The school community was receptive to the idea.

A meeting was set up to discuss the program with the Parent Teacher Association. Families of all students at the school were given informational fliers about the program and sent in helpful information for staff, such as whether their child had any allergies or was afraid of dogs. Shannon also contacted each parent in her classroom to explain the premise of the idea. Everyone was encouraging and returned signed permission slips confirming that they understood that their child would be working with an animal and that they were allowing it.

Shannon prepared her students for their new addition by reading several books about dogs and pet care. They discussed appropriate ways to address and handle Hope, as well as developed a list of classroom jobs to ensure that she would be well taken care of. A crate was added behind the teacher’s desk and was identified as a quiet and off-limits area for Hope to rest when she would not be working with students. Another corner of the room was devoted to the new program and was furnished with a comfortable rug and cushions for the dog and children.

The class spent the first few days getting to know Hope and letting her adjust to the classroom environment. Every morning the students would fulfill their jobs for Hope’s upkeep, including grooming and feeding. These responsibilities allowed students to develop a relationship with Hope and to take ownership in her care.



Figure 2 Hope Reads With a Student



Figure 3 Hope Shares a Book With Her Friend



Note. Photo by Carrie Pratt.

Shannon devised a weekly schedule for the class so that each child, especially the ones who needed additional practice, would have two or three opportunities per week to individually read to Hope. Every morning students on the schedule were able to browse the classroom library, which has a special section devoted to books about animals, to select a specific book that they would like to read to Hope during their turn. Twenty-minute sessions were conducted in the quiet space that was created around the animal library. The teacher always sat nearby to supervise and monitor for progress, but she was generally not included as part of the activity (see Figures 2 and 3).

Word of the program spread throughout the school as well as the district, and increasingly Shannon received requests from children from other classrooms to come work with Hope. The teacher then implemented before and after school times so that other primary-grade students would have the opportunity to benefit from the program. Throughout the school year, she recorded tremendous gains in the reading skills of her

students. They demonstrated increased self-confidence, oral fluency, and overall motivation to read. The program turned out to be a successful implementation for her classroom and the school as a whole (see Figure 4).

### **Public Library: Colorado**

Julie Dahl and her flat-coated retriever, Jackie, had been doing therapy work for a few years through the Delta Society and Therapy Dogs International (TDI). Most of their work had been in nursing homes around Denver. Ready for a new challenge and knowing just how gentle and patient Jackie was, Julie wanted to find some kind of work that involved children. She learned that the organizations that she worked with had programs in which dogs and their handlers visited public libraries so that children could read to them. Being a self-described bookworm, Julie knew this was the right choice for her, and she was sure Jackie would enjoy it, as well.

With the help of the children's librarian, children were recruited to participate. They signed up for a six-week period and attended once per week. Some children just wanted to

enjoy the novelty of reading to a dog, but others were struggling readers who were targeted for assistance. Each child picked a dog he or she wanted to read to, and parents watched the interactions through a window. The child received a handout about the dog chosen that included information about the dog's breed and things the dog liked. Each child also selected the book to read to the dog. The children's librarian assisted by locating books about dogs, but any book would do (see Table 1 for a list of books related to dogs).

After introducing Jackie to a child, Julie would sit back and watch as the child read a book to Jackie. When the child came to a word he or she didn't know, with Julie's guidance, Jackie would "help" by putting her paw over one part of the word at a time. Jackie could also "point" to the pictures to prompt the child to talk about the book. Julie would also probe the child about the book on Jackie's behalf, saying, "Jackie wants to know what that means" or "Explain to Jackie why that happened." Children would grin with delight as Jackie seemed to listen carefully as they told her about the

**Table 1** Examples of Children's Books That Feature Dogs

Dog Books for Younger Children	Dog Books for Older Kids
<i>Olive, My Love</i> by Vivian Walsh	<i>Because of Winn-Dixie</i> by Kate DiCamillo
<i>Olive, the Other Reindeer</i> by Vivian Walsh	<i>Lassie, Come Home</i> by Eric Knight
<i>Dog Heaven</i> by Cynthia Rylant	<i>Beautiful Joe</i> by Marshall Saunders
<i>Officer Buckle and Gloria</i> by Peggy Rathmann	<i>Where the Red Fern Grows</i> by Wilson Rawls
<i>How Rocket Learned to Read</i> by Tad Hills	<i>Stone Fox</i> by John Reynolds Gardiner
<i>Walter the Farting Dog</i> by William Kotzwinkle and Glenn Murray	<i>Old Yeller</i> by Fred Gipson
<i>Harry the Dirty Dog</i> by Gene Zion	<i>The Incredible Journey</i> by Sheila Burnford
<i>Angus Lost</i> by Marjorie Flack	
<i>A Dog's Life: Autobiography of a Stray</i> by Anne M. Martin	<b>Book Series That Feature Dogs</b>
<i>Go, Dog. Go!</i> by P.D. Eastman	Clifford the Big Red Dog by Norman Bridwell
<i>Dear Mrs. La Rue: Letters From Obedience School</i> by Mark Teague	Boomer series by Constance W. McGeorge
<i>Dog on It: A Chet and Bernie Mystery</i> by Spencer Quinn	Jack Russell: Dog Detective series by Darrel Odgers and Sally Odgers
<i>A Dog's Life</i> by Peter Mayle	Pinkerton series by Steven Kellogg
<i>The Adventures of Taxi Dog</i> by Debra Barracca and Sal Barracca	Carl series by Alexandra Day
<i>Fire, Bed, and Bone</i> by Henrietta Branford	Biscuit series by Alyssa Satin Capucilli
<i>The Dyslexic Dalmatian</i> by Dana Willhite	Spot series by Eric Hill
<i>Katie Loves the Kittens</i> by John Himmelman	<b>Dog Alphabet Books</b>
<i>Buster</i> by Denise Fleming	<i>The Dog From Arf! Arf! to Zzzzzz</i> by The Dog Artist Collection
<i>Salty Dog</i> by Gloria Rad	<i>Dogabet</i> by Dianna Bonder
<i>Dog Breath</i> by Dav Pilkey	<i>Dogs ABC: An Alphabet Book</i> by B.A. Hoena
<i>Henry and Mudge</i> by Cynthia Rylant	<i>Dog's ABC: A Silly Story about the Alphabet</i> by Emma Dodd
<i>Skinny Brown Dog</i> by Kimberly Willis Holt	<i>Kipper's A to Z: An Alphabet Adventure</i> by Mick Inkpen
<i>Sit, Truman!</i> by Dan Harper	<i>W Is for Woof: A Dog Alphabet</i> by Ruth Strother
<i>The bravest Dog Ever: The True Story of Balto</i> by Natalie Standiford	<i>Arf! Beg! Catch! Dogs From A to Z</i> by Henry Horenstein
<i>Before You Were Mine</i> by Maribeth Boelts	
<i>Buddy Unchained</i> by Daisy Bix	
<i>Dog Gone</i> by Cynthia Chapman Willis	
<i>Ribsy</i> by Beverly Cleary	

book. At the end of each session, the children received stickers to wear that indicated they had read to a dog. Julie remembers one particularly shy little girl who couldn't wait to wear her sticker to school the next day.

### **Cirra, the Dog Scout: Maine**

Cirra is a 105-pound Great Pyrenees who lives in Maine with her handler, Robyn Douglas. Together, Cirra and Robyn are members of the Downeast Dog Scouts

Troop. To become a Dog Scout, each dog and handler must meet numerous requirements to demonstrate that the dog has learned basic obedience and that the Dog Scout's companion is a responsible dog parent. The handler must do a good job of controlling the dog, and the dog must display a sound temperament.

Cirra and Robyn have participated in numerous literacy-related activities. In 2008 Cirra began helping the readers in the kindergarten through third grades

at a local school. Children took turns reading to Cirra, and Cirra had "pups" help the readers at home with a Buddy Bag program for each participating classroom during the school year. Each Buddy Bag contained a fluffy stuffed white dog that looked like a miniature Cirra, along with books selected by the teachers. Children took the Buddy Bags home overnight, so they could continue to practice reading (see Figure 5).

In 2010, the Downeast Dog Scouts Troop presented the Island Dog Creative Writing Project to local schools. In this project, 124 children contributed their written tales about *Island Dog*, an artful picture book. At the community Island Dog Celebration, the children read their stories to Cirra and the other Dog Scouts and received certificates of accomplishment for their writings. More recently, Cirra and Robyn began a reading program at the local public library. In this program, children get to learn all about the Great Pyrenees with Cirra's Breed Cards and word puzzles about Cirra, and they read books to Cirra. Cirra thanks the children for reading with special bookmarks, dog stickers, paw print pencils, and reward books on completing their goals.

### **Getting Started With a Canine-Assisted Reading Program**

Teachers and others interested in starting a canine-assisted reading program must prepare carefully (see Table 2 for a summary of suggested steps). A good place to begin is consulting the various national organizations to determine whether they have a local chapter (see Table 3 for contact information). There are many benefits in working with an established, national organization. For example, most national programs have their own training standards to ensure that participating dogs and their

## WHEN READING GETS RUFF: CANINE-ASSISTED READING PROGRAMS

Figure 4 Student, Teacher, and Canine Reading Together



Note. Photo by Carrie Pratt.

Figure 5 Cirra and Her “Buddy Bags”



handlers are well prepared for working with children. These programs also have clearly defined steps for establishing a program. Several programs also have liability insurance for their volunteers, in case there is ever a problem.

If there is no local chapter of one of the national organizations, there are still ways to establish a program. The first step is to establish goals. What do you hope to accomplish with a dog-assisted reading program? Are your goals more suited for an AAT program (i.e., targeting the needs of specific children through sustained intervention) or an AAA program (providing an occasional motivational activity for all children)? This determination will guide your planning and decision making.

It is important to discuss plans from the beginning with the local administrator to ensure that there is support for the program. Once this support is established, it is important to involve all stakeholders to ensure the success of the program. Perhaps most importantly, communication with parents is needed to ensure they are well informed about the program and have opportunities to provide their input.

It is also important to carefully select dogs and handlers for participation. All participating dogs should be tested for temperament, behavior, and health. Before being considered for a canine-assisted reading program, it should be well established that a dog’s temperament and behavior is very stable and predictable around children. Programs

such as the AKC’s Canine Good Citizen program provide an initial level of temperament screening to ensure that a dog has mastered basic good manners around humans.

Obedience training offered through a qualified trainer is also essential. Ideally, participating dogs will be tested by a certified evaluator from an organization

Table 2 Steps for Establishing a School-Based Dog-Assisted Reading Program

- 1. Identify goals for your program.** Determine what you hope to accomplish, who might benefit, and how. Will your program be just for struggling or reluctant readers, or will all students have the opportunity to participate?
- 2. Elicit administrative support.** Start by explaining the benefits of canine-assisted reading programs. Be prepared for the questions and concerns that a principal or library director might have. Consult the resources provided here for answers.
- 3. Communicate with parents.** Share your plans with parents. Listen carefully for their questions and concerns, as well, and be sure to have an option available for children whose parents do not want their children to participate. Your thorough advance planning will go a long way toward alleviating parents’ worries.
- 4. Contact local therapy dog organizations to recruit volunteers.** Start by contacting one of the national programs to see if they have a chapter in your area. If they don’t, finding a local kennel club or dog fancier society is a good place to start. They will likely be able to put you in contact with an appropriate organization. Local dog trainers may also be a good resource for finding individuals who may be interested and willing to help.
- 5. Prepare your students carefully.** Consider which of your students need the motivation and practice that your program will provide. Ensure that each of these students is interested in participating, and be careful to respect any fears or uneasiness. Help all your students learn how to act around your canine visitors.



**Table 3 Resources to Support the Development of a Canine-Assisted Reading Program**

Reading Education Assistance Dogs Intermountain Therapy Animals 4050 South 2700 East Salt Lake City, Utah 84124 Phone: (801) 272-3439 Fax: (801) 272-3470 Website: <a href="http://www.therapyanimals.org">www.therapyanimals.org</a>	Delta Society 875 124th Ave NE Suite 101 Bellevue, WA 98005 Phone: (425) 679-5500 Fax: (425) 679-5539 Website: <a href="http://www.deltasociety.org">www.deltasociety.org</a>
Canine Good Citizen Program American Kennel Club CGC Department PO Box 900064 Raleigh, NC 27675-9064 Phone: (919) 816-3637 Website: <a href="http://www.akc.org">www.akc.org</a>	Therapy Dogs International 88 Bartley Road Flanders, NJ 07836 Phone: (973) 252-9800 Fax: (973) 252-7171 E-mail: <a href="mailto:tdi@gti.net">tdi@gti.net</a> Website: <a href="http://www.tdi-dog.org">www.tdi-dog.org</a>
Dog Scouts of America Website: <a href="http://www.dogscouts.org">www.dogscouts.org</a>	Library Dogs Website: <a href="http://www.librarydogs.com">www.librarydogs.com</a>

such as TDI, which has rigorous standards for both the dog and the handler. All participating dogs should also be certified by a veterinarian as being in good health and current on all vaccinations.

It is also important to prepare children well before a dog's first visit to a classroom. It is crucial that children be taught explicitly how to behave around the dog. Children are naturally curious and may be inclined to approach the dog or touch the dog in a way that may not be appropriate or safe. It is important to discuss these issues with students in advance to teach them what is and is not appropriate. Role-playing interactions can help children learn and recall how to act.

The dog's handler should be able to provide you with tips about the specific dog and what the children need to know about it. If you have had good communication with parents about the program, you will likely be aware of any children with a fear of dogs, and you can work with the parents to determine whether the child should participate and how best to deal with the child's fears.

There are a number of other issues to consider before launching a program (Friesen, 2010b). The most important issue is safety—the children's safety and the dog's safety. Selecting dogs carefully, as described, and preparing children in advance will prevent most problems. Still, it is absolutely essential that there is careful and close supervision of the dog and children at all times. In the case of children with known behavioral difficulties, extra instruction in advance and extra supervision during visits may be necessary.

Many canine therapy organizations require that dogs remain on leashes at all times, with their handlers holding the leash. This can ensure better control in the case of a problem. However, many dogs do well without a leash, and if proper supervision is provided, this may be safe, as well. In any case, it is important to be aware of the liability issues that accompany programs like this. Some therapy organizations provide liability insurance for their handlers, but it is important that the issue of liability is a part of the discussion with the site administrator before a program is launched.

Some children may have allergies that will be aggravated by the presence of a dog in the classroom. This issue should be part of the communication with parents before a program begins. Allergic reactions can be minimized by bathing the dog before each visit, applying an antidander solution to the dog's fur, and hand washing after each encounter with the dog. Some parents may also want to administer a prophylactic dose of antihistamine on days the dog will be visiting the classroom. However, in the case of children with severe allergies, it may be inadvisable to have a dog in the classroom at all.

Another concern that may need to be addressed is sanitation. Again, bathing the dog before visits and washing hands after interacting will eliminate most problems, but accidents do happen, and a dog might vomit, urinate, or defecate in an inappropriate location. It is important to have a plan in place in advance for dealing with these problems should they occur and for managing the more common issues of shedding and drooling. It is also important to recognize that some families view dogs as unclean, and if there are children from families with these views in your classroom, it is important to consider their needs before implementing a program.

Although one might wonder, given all the issues described here, whether a canine-assisted program is worthwhile, those who have been involved in such programs are quick to insist that the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. Most issues can be prevented or eliminated through effective planning and communication, and problems in well-planned programs are rare. Although there is still much research to be conducted on the effects of children reading with dogs, existing data indicate that such programs hold real promise. For teachers who have



struggled to find ways to motivate and encourage reluctant readers, canine-assisted reading programs may be just the right solution.

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