

PAWSitive Therapy Troupe

R.E.A.D. Program Guidelines for Using Therapy Dogs in School Reading Programs

R.E.A.D. stands for Reading Education Assistance Dogs, a program originally developed by Intermountain Therapy Animals in Salt Lake City, Utah in 1999. Started initially as a “Dog Day Afternoon” program in a Salt Lake City library to make reading fun for children, it has grown to become an ongoing reading education program used by schools, libraries and bookstores across the country. READ programs have been featured in many television news stories, as well in national and local print media.

R.E.A.D. programs aim to improve children’s literacy skills through a very simple concept—having the children read their specially chosen books out loud to the therapy dogs to practice and hone their reading ability. The therapy dog’s “job” is to settle in quietly to listen to the child read his /her story, while the dog’s handler gently helps the child with pronunciation, word recognition and vocabulary skills as needed. Each child usually spends 10-15 minutes reading to the dog, followed by a “wrap-up” of a few minutes to pet the dog and give it a treat. At many schools, it is the Title I children who are selected for participation in the READ programs. The overwhelming majority of these children relax quickly, and forget about their embarrassment at their reading skills. They actually feel “special” in a good way—they have been chosen to participate in this unique and very fun program. ESL children especially seem to benefit from READ programs—they are often very shy about reading in English, and this gives them a chance to practice in a non-threatening, supportive way that is also lots of fun.

Some benefits of participation in READ programs:

Dogs give unconditional love and acceptance

Dogs are non-judgmental

The repetitive acts of touching / petting / brushing the dog have calming effects on children

Dogs make reading fun, without worry about poor pronunciation or slow reading speed

READ programs have been shown to decrease absenteeism, create more excitement about being in school, and help to build self-esteem by giving the child a sense of accomplishment

Some commonly asked questions about READ programs:

What kinds of dogs are used for READ programs?

The READ dogs from the PAWSitive Therapy Troupe are specially trained and tested by a national therapy dog organization, the Delta Society. All of the dogs that come to the schools are registered Delta Society Pet Partners. Therapy dog / handler

teams carry their own liability insurance from Delta Society, which covers them as long as they are acting under Delta's policies for therapy work. Therapy dog training includes extensive obedience training and socialization to all types of potentially scary / threatening things that the dogs might encounter during an actual therapy visit. You can expect the PAWSitive Therapy Troupe dogs to be calm, friendly, and under their handler's control at all times. They will come to class freshly bathed and groomed so that they are a pleasure for the children to touch.

Who is responsible for selecting the children for the program and the books that they bring?

Usually READ programs are under the direction of the school reading specialist and / or classroom teacher. Our experience suggests that it may be beneficial for children to choose their book a week or so in advance. This provides the opportunity for them to practice under the direction of the teacher or reading specialist, or perhaps even at home. It should be a book appropriate for the child's age and reading level. Often books about animals, especially dogs, are fun.

What other types of activities may be utilized during a READ program visit?

Often the teacher or reading specialist will design activities around the therapy dogs, such as a group stage play, where the children take turns reading parts of the play out loud to the dogs. Another idea is a poem that the children all practice reading out loud. The therapy dogs' handlers are always under the direction of the teacher or reading specialist. If there is a specific method such as echo reading that the teacher would like the handler to use with the child, the teacher should explain that technique to the handler so that she can carry it out with the child. Handlers are familiar with many of the reading improvement techniques, but they will need direction from the teacher. Often the handler can use her dog to help the child sound out a word, using the dog's paw on the page.

Visiting therapy dogs are a wonderful benefit for school programs. There are many activities that can expand upon the time that children are actually interacting with the dogs. These are some of the ideas schools have used in the past following our visits:

- Dictate dog stories
- Write dog mysteries
- Write a pet care manual
- List pet care supplies
- Draw pictures of the dogs to give as thank you's for next time
- Collect pictures from magazines
- Re-write a fairy tale or children's story with dog characters
- Interview the therapy dogs for the school paper
- Incorporate vocabulary words into a story about the dogs
- Incorporate pictures of the dogs into written work

We would love to list your ideas as well—please share them with us!

What Kind of Space is Required for a READ Program?

The room where the READ visits will take place should be large enough to allow several dogs / handler / child groups to sit on the floor while reading, and still not be piled too close to each other. Large cushions or beanbag chairs make the floor a more comfortable place for handlers and children to sit. Handlers may bring their own quilts / blankets to help define their own dog's space.

Guidelines for Keeping Both Children and Dogs Safe:

1. We prefer to have only one child at a time read to the dog. This allows the handler to focus all her attention on helping the child with his / her reading, and also allows the handler to give complete support to her dog at all times.
2. Dogs, like people, have personal comfort zones. Just as a person does not feel comfortable with a stranger getting into his / her personal space, so even a well-trained therapy dog does not enjoy sudden hugs and kisses from a child that it has just met. Children should start with gentle petting on the chest and back. They should ALWAYS ask permission to hug or kiss a dog on the head. Although our therapy dogs are well trained, friendly and well socialized, they are first and foremost dogs—NOT people. Any dog has the potential to bite if it feels so threatened that it has no other option to protect itself. Our handlers will always be supervising dog / child interactions, but it would be very helpful if teachers could also emphasize these safety issues in class before the dogs come in.
3. General rules to go over in class before the dogs come:
 - a. Always ask permission before petting the dog; respect the dog's personal space; proceed slowly and let the dog get used to you; pet on the chest or back first—don't start with the top of the head.
 - b. Ask the handler for permission to give the dog a treat. Treats should be given with the palm of the hand open and flat—NOT between fingers.
 - c. Move quietly around the dogs—watch that you don't step on a tail or paw.
 - d. Try not to shout or scream—dogs don't like those kinds of noises.
 - e. Above all, remember that the therapy dog is not a toy. He is a living being. However, he is NOT a human being. Treat him with respect, gentleness and kindness.
 - f. Therapy dogs are trained to be calm and gentle during READ visits. Don't be surprised if the dog lays his head down on the child's lap or lies down on the floor as if he is sleeping. He is still listening—he just has his eyes closed and is concentrating!
4. If you would like a brief classroom presentation on therapy dog training and safe handling, please let us know. We would be glad to help.

For further information on READ programs and / therapy dogs you can visit the following websites:

Delta Society www.deltasociety.org

Intermountain Therapy Animals www.intermountaintherapyanimals.com

