



R.E.A.D.

A New Generation of Therapy Dogs

As a lifelong dog lover, pet owner and mother to a physically handicapped child, I am no stranger to the therapeutic effects that dogs can have on human beings. Most people are familiar with traditional service dogs used to help the visually and physically impaired. You see them out and about donning their working dog vests, aiding their owners in crossing the street, opening doors, picking up fallen objects, or many other tasks where assistance is needed. From a medical standpoint these dogs are extremely valuable companions as they allow their owners a sense of safety, companionship and independence.

Perhaps you have been in a hospital and witnessed a therapy dog stretched across the lap of a sick child receiving cancer treatment, or maybe being stroked by a lonely elderly person in a nursing home. The comfort and health benefits provided by these types of therapy dogs are also priceless. What you may not know is that over the past decade a new school of therapy dog teams has emerged. R.E.A.D. (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) does not cater to the medical and emotional needs of human beings, rather places its emphasis on education and improving literacy. I spoke with Nancy Brooks, the enthusiastic founder and head of my local Minnesota chapter of the R.E.A.D. program since 2004, in order to learn what makes this program so unique and successful.

The Birth of R.E.A.D.

The R.E.A.D. program was first launched in Salt Lake City, Utah in 1999 by the group Intermountain Therapy Animals. This organization recognized all of the positive ways in which therapy dogs have benefited human beings. They decided to extend their services to include improving child literacy through employing the simple method of reading to a dog. The program's mission is to

improve the reading and communication skills of children through the assistance of registered therapy teams as literacy mentors. These R.E.A.D. teams are made up of registered therapy animals who volunteer with their owner/ handlers as a team, going to schools, libraries and many other settings as reading companions for children. Since its inception, R.E.A.D. has spread across all 50 states, three provinces in Canada, and even traveled to Europe and beyond. The program has been so successful that Congress declared November 14 "National Read Day" in honor of the program's ten year anniversary.

Who Benefits?

In 2009, The U.S. Department of Education estimated that there are around 32 million adults in the United States who are unable to read. The national "America Reads" program notes that 40% of fourth graders read below their grade level and that children who don't master reading by the third grade risk falling further behind. In the current school system, children enrolled in grades K-3 are learning to read, while children enrolled in grades four and above are reading in order to learn. While the R.E.A.D. program is open to and benefits everyone, adults, children, the disabled, mentally delayed and even reluctant readers, the target group remains those children in grades K-3.

Did you know that public speaking is one of the most common fears that continues to plague people from adolescence through adulthood? Literacy specialists acknowledge that children who are struggling with reading are often intimidated by reading aloud in a group setting. They suffer from low self-esteem and negatively view reading as a chore. In other words, children who are learning to read often have a difficult time because they are stressed, nervous, or self-conscious, not because they aren't smart enough. It is this simple fact that R.E.A.D. has used as a foundation to build the exceptionally successful program that exists today.

How does it work?

In short, a typical R.E.A.D. session usually takes place at a school or library and lasts about a half hour. This includes; a few minutes for getting acquainted and comfortable, reading time, then a few minutes at the end for tricks and treats. As children advance to the next reading levels they receive "pawtographed" books to take home with them as a reward for their hard work. Some R.E.A.D. teams even give the children souvenir bookmarks or other mementos of their time spent with the dog. It sounds fairly simple, yet what actually transpires during those 30 minutes is much more intricate than what is visible to the naked eye.

Nancy explains that first and foremost, the component that makes R.E.A.D. teams unique is that they understand how important it is to set up a positive and non-threatening learning environment for the child. The session takes place as a one-on-one experience with privacy or semi-privacy so the child can blossom without criticism from his or her peers. There are blankets and big pillows spread out on the floor where the child and dog can sit comfortably together. This also allows some physical connection between them. The child is usually petting or stroking the dog, or in some cases even lying against it while reading. This interaction has been proven to have a calming effect on the body by lowering both blood pressure and heart rate. When children read with a dog they immediately begin to relax as they are infused by the dog's calmness. This allows them to let go of their fears and forget about their feelings of self-consciousness since they are enjoying themselves so much. Their only audience, the dog, listens intently, offering unconditional love and acceptance. He will never judge, ridicule, correct or interrupt when the child struggles with a difficult word. They no longer have to worry

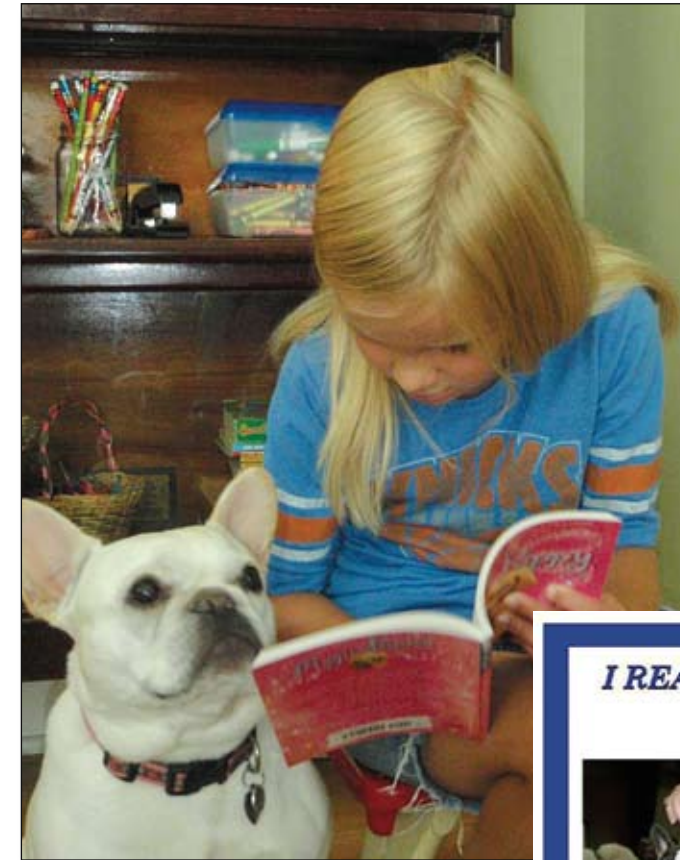
about looking foolish and making mistakes which causes them to freeze up and fall apart. The dogs allow the child to read at his own pace which makes the reading fun.

When a R.E.A.D. dog is listening, the environment is transformed and a children's dread is replaced with eager anticipation and this allows learning to occur. Mentoring the dog builds confidence. The dog knows less than the child does, which makes the child feel useful and competent. The children love to involve the dogs, turning the book toward them and showing them pictures to make sure they understand the story. They build an intimate relationship with the dog, gaining enormous satisfaction from being the teacher.

The handler of each R.E.A.D. team fulfills a crucial role in the learning process. Nancy describes how each handler implements four categories of learning during a session, focusing on goals, knowledge, skills and feelings. There is no correcting the child, rather, the handler must act as a "skilled facilitator" when the child makes a mistake. He or she does this by encouraging and by "helping the child to help the dog understand." Once this non-threatening method of learning is employed, the performance pressure shifts off the child who is reading. It provides support while enabling the child to build vocabulary, increase comprehension of the reading material and become a more fluent reader. The dog makes a wonderful vehicle for communication.

The handler can speak for and about the dog to make many valid points about pronunciation and comprehension. For example, the handler can say, "Sassy has never heard that word before, Sophia, can you tell her what it means?". The child then feels less embarrassed than when she is put on the spot or corrected. The dog is also used as a role model for improving other skills, such as personal hygiene or good behavior. In the first few minutes of each session, while the child and the dog are getting acquainted, Nancy often describes the steps she had to take to prepare and groom the dog; such as bathing, combing and brushing its teeth. This instruction positively influences the child and leads them by example.

R.E.A.D. allows children to improve their reading skills by providing a unique and positive environment in which learning is facilitated. Reading to an animal becomes special fun time. Children with low self-esteem are often more willing to interact with animals than people, allowing them to relax and forget their limitations. As the child becomes more comfortable reading to the dog,



tolerant of loud or sudden noises and new or unfamiliar surroundings. Compatibility with other animals is also a requirement. The dog must be flawlessly groomed to appear attractive and fun to touch and stroke. Most importantly, he must enjoy children and like curling up on the floor with them to hear stories. Handlers/owners must meet most of the same requirements as the dog. It is important that they maintain a professional appearance and demeanor, while possessing a love of children and reading books. They must also be willing to donate their own free time, spend the money for certification and do the upkeep that the dog requires.

All R.E.A.D. teams are required to be registered, certified, and insured teams with a therapy animal registry such as: Therapy Dogs International or Delta

Society. This includes a screening for skills, temperament, health, cleanliness, good manners and attitude. Once you have met all of the above requirements, you and your dog must complete the R.E.A.D. training program. Finally, you must decide if you would like to work independently or join one of the many groups of dog/handler teams volunteering in communities across the globe.

Get in Touch

R.E.A.D. is a nonprofit organization that relies solely on the donations of generous people like yourself and the handlers that donate their own time and resources to the program. They are always grateful for any monetary contributions, or the donation of new or gently used books for the program. If you are interested in donating, becoming a R.E.A.D. team, or would like to learn more about this program, you can do so at - therapyanimals.org/read. Nancy Brooks and the Minnesota branch of R.E.A.D. can be found at - readdogsmn.org



fluency and comprehension increase, confidence is built and social skills improve. It changes children's negative attitudes toward reading and makes them want to read. Studies have shown that participation in the R.E.A.D. program for 20 minutes, once a week, yielded amazing results. School children exhibited improved performance in other subjects, decreased absenteeism, practiced better hygiene, volunteered to read out loud more frequently, and even checked more books out of the library.

Who Can Be a R.E.A.D. Team?

It doesn't matter if you have a 16 year-old, two pound Yorkie or a 200 pound, three year-old Mastiff as age and size are non-issues (though older, "couch-potato" types tend to be good). However, your dog's temperament is a make or break deal. A good R.E.A.D. dog, as with any therapy dog, must be calm, reliable, obedient, gentle and relaxed. He must be

I READ with Rita



Rita, a French Bulldog is a therapy dog with Therapy Dogs, Inc. & a Reading Education Assistance Dog in Grove, OK



READING EDUCATION ASSISTANCE DOGS™
A PROGRAM OF INTERMOUNTAIN THERAPY ANIMALS