

This is how therapy dogs help kids read

W



hen I was eight years old, I began learning to play guitar. At first my delivery sounded pretty rough. Mistakes made, frustrations whined, back to the beginning of the piece, over and over -- that's how practices went. Hours of hacking away must've been unbearable for my parents. (Maybe that's why I played in the den behind closed French doors.)

My talent wasn't fit for human ears, but it worked for our little black toy poodle Jerri, there at my feet, content with every flat twang and erratic tempo.

This same kind of good-listening skill has been recognized in recent years by canine therapy groups that certify human/canine teams to help children read. One is Therapy Dogs International (TDI), a volunteer, nonprofit organization out of New Jersey, established in 1976, and the oldest and largest such group in the country.

TDI has tested and registered more than 25,000 pet-therapy dogs and handlers for visitations to

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February 2015

nursing homes, hospitals, schools, and libraries. Its Disaster Stress Relief Dogs program (DSRD) has responded to major events, including September 11, Hurricane Katrina, the Sandy Hook school shooting, and the Boston Marathon bombings.

Tail Waggin' Tutors is TDI's reading program for kids. Dog/handler teams visit schools and libraries with the goal of improving student reading skills. According to its website, when a child sits down next to a dog and reads, "all threats of being judged are put aside. Reading improves because the child is practicing the skill of reading, building self-esteem, and associating reading with something pleasant." Dogs help create a comforting, relaxed learning environment; they make reading fun.

Reading aloud in class can be scary, especially for shy or inexperienced readers. Reading to dogs eliminates the shame of making mistakes. Positive sessions encourage more practice, resulting in better readers.

The Miami Shores Brockway Memorial Library has a reading-to-dogs after-school program for children. Youth Services Librarian Anne Kelly explains that the program began with a dog named Irma, who has since moved away.

Those shoes were filled last September by a four-and-a-half-year-old, wavy-coated goldendoodle, Gracie, and her owner-handler, Liz Cowen. They've been registered for three years with a different organization, Therapy Dogs Inc., and previously volunteered at an Alzheimer's/cancer center.

Mondays at 4:00 p.m., the team walks into the library's activity room and settles into two voluminous bean bags on the royal-blue "Read to Succeed" carpet with a youngster and a good book for 15-minute sessions. Gracie dons a simple red harness -- Cowen doesn't like her to wear the usual large vest, which covers up her pet-able ginger fur. She wants kids to have the full sensory experience.

When the book is finished, each child reaches into Cowen's bag of Knotties for a hair tie/bracelet memento of the session. The lifelong Shores resident grew up with Brockway Library, and is now giving back to her community.

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Another Shores resident giving back is attorney Doreen Lasch. She and her six-year-old rescued golden retriever, Sam, were certified by TDI six months ago. Besides holding “Read with Sam” sessions on Thursdays at the library, they’ll soon be involved in the court program for children. Sam sports a red kerchief around his massive copper-colored neck, with the embroidered logo-patch “Paws Awhile for Love.” This friendly giant is serenity incarnate. A sound temperament is *the* essential quality for TDI-registered dogs.

However, there’s a lot more to certification than owning a mannerly dog. Therapy dog applicants are put through a rigorous test of 13 exercises that simulate facility visits with sudden loud noises, crowds, walkers, and active children. Dogs must be over 12 months old, have good grooming, good health, and required vaccines. Shyness, jumping up, and aggression of any kind aren’t acceptable. They must ignore food; know the commands heel, sit, down, stay, and come; and not pull the leash.

At Brockway, kids are the beneficiaries of all this testing. Christine Welstead is the mother of Miami Country Day first-grader Cameron, who’s a routine library visitor and high-level reader but “saw another child reading to Gracie and expressed interest herself. Cameron thought this was a great idea.”

Parents get a lot out of it, too. Lively seven-year-old Raphael attends first grade at Miami Shores Community Church School. He eagerly skips into the room after first asking librarian Kelly if he can take off his shoes, then flops into a bean bag.

His father, Roy Llera, sits on the floor, petting Sam while his son ably reads *Big Dog ... Little Dog*. Llera sadly admits they had to find another home for their own golden because his older son has allergies; now coming to the library “is pretty emotional for me,” he adds, and is as much for Dad as for Raphael.

When time’s up, Lasch kindly offers a laminated bookmark bearing Sam’s likeness -- a perfect remembrance of the day.

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