

"Paws for Reading" at the Memphis Public Library

by

Mary Seratt
Memphis Public Library

Conference Abstract: If children who are reluctant readers come to your library, you may want to “go to the dogs.” Following protocol developed by Intermountain Therapy Animals, the Children’s Department partnered with the R.E.A.D.[®] program. You can help young readers succeed, too!

The Reading Education Assistance Dogs came to the Memphis Public Library and Information Center in September 2004. This program is now active at three branches, and we hope to expand as pet partners become available. This session of the Tennessee Library Association’s Annual Conference will relate how “Paws for Reading” started at our library, as well as provide some information about the R.E.A.D.[®] program in general and the specifics of how the program works at the library. We’ll walk you through a typical visit at the library with the R.E.A.D.[®] partners and share some of the stories that have touched our hearts and made us sure that it is a very good thing that the library has gone to the dogs.

In August 2004, Michelle Buckalew, editor and publisher of *Animal World*, contacted our director, Judith Dresher, with information about a relatively new program that was becoming available in the Memphis area. As a former library employee, Michelle thought that Ms. Dresher would be receptive to this innovative program. Fortunately for our young customers and us, Judy was willing to let Youth Services Coordinator Linda Gibson and me work out the details. My department, the Children’s Department at the Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, is often used as a test site for new programming. My staff and I work out the details of a program, and if it is successful, it frequently goes system-wide.

Linda and I met with Michelle and with Mary Ehrhart of Mid-South Therapy Dogs. Michelle would coordinate publicity and coverage of the program, while Mary would coordinate the R.E.A.D.[®] partners and work with

Intermountain Therapy Animals (discussed later). Mary would also determine the level of certification that animals and their handlers must obtain before becoming R.E.A.D.® partners. I was very willing to give the program a trial at Central Library. My family has several companion animals, including three dogs, so I know the potential for joy that animals bring to a setting, but I was unprepared for the effect of Paws for Reading on our customers and staff.

In order to understand the difference between the “Paws for Reading” program and having a pet visit the library, some background is necessary. There are three components to the overall organization of the program. Intermountain Therapy Animals (ITA) of Utah has oversight and ownership of the R.E.A.D.® program, which began in 1999. ITA is a 501c3 non-profit organization whose mission is “enhancing quality of life through the human-animal bond” ([Intermountain Therapy Animals website](#)). They are an affiliate of the Delta Society, which developed the Pet Partners® program to train volunteers and screen animals for participation in therapy programs ([Delta Society website](#)).

ITA requires the observation of stringent behavioral guidelines for both animal and handler. They stand behind every animal/handler pair that completes certification. Partners that make it through the training program are highly reliable as well as insurable -- which is no small issue when the safety of library customers is a concern. Mary Ehrhart and Deb Taylor of MidSouth Therapy Animals are certified Delta Society trainers, and maintain the high standards of both affiliate organizations.

The advent of the R.E.A.D.® program is described at the [Intermountain Therapy Animals website](#):

Sandi Martin, one of ITA’s board members, “put two and two together” by wondering whether therapy animals might be used in the reading setting. A nurse and former ICU manager, she had seen firsthand the benefits that animals brought to patients and how they helped enhance patients’ desire to heal and work on their therapies. Wouldn’t the same benefits accrue with children who were struggling to learn to read? Voila—the idea for Reading Education Assistance Dogs was born. We often think it’s one of those ideas that seems so brilliant that it’s a wonder someone hadn’t thought it up long before.

In fact, there is documented evidence that people have read to dogs before, but Intermountain Therapy Animals was the first to build a structure around this concept and develop it into a true literacy program with models for schools, libraries and other settings.

With the backing of MidSouth Therapy Animals, the Delta Society, and ITA, we are 99.99% sure that a R.E.A.D.® dog is well-behaved, reliable, interested in people, and possessed of “good manners.” I often tell customers who are skeptical about the dogs’ place in the library that I am more likely to bite them than a R.E.A.D.® dog is--and that the dogs are liable to be better groomed as well! R.E.A.D.® is a registered trademark, and unless the animal and partners are certified by ITA, they are not “official” R.E.A.D.® partners.

The program is simple. Children read to dogs that in turn provide them with unconditional acceptance. The library supplies a space in the children’s reading room for the R.E.A.D.® partners to sit and read with children. We supply permission slips, flyers, and frequently select books on a variety of reading levels. We have developed a combination book log and permission form/media release that has a dog motif especially for this program. The child can keep track of the titles of books read, and the release form allows us to use any photos in library publications. The forms are kept in a secure area in our department’s workroom when not in use. Our graphic designer also created a bone-shaped bookmark with information about the days and time of the program. These are available at the reference desk as reminders and are also given to children who have finished reading as a souvenir. We maintain sign-up sheets, as registration is recommended. This allows us to have a handle on how many children we can expect to participate per session. Each R.E.A.D.® partner visit lasts two hours so that a dog and its partner can read with eight children per day.

Staff members assigned to the desk during that period not only sign up children to read, but also do regular reader’s advisory with children who want to choose just the right book. Once the R.E.A.D.® partners arrive, a staff member greets them and helps them set up their space. We use easels with large foam core backed signs to designate the area where the dog’s mat will be placed and to maintain a little distance between readers and observers. The signs feature a photo of the dog with the statement, “Shhh! Please don’t disturb us while we read. We’ll answer questions when we are through.” Most customers are happy to cooperate. The one-to-one

interaction is the key to the program. Staff may have to remind some parents that this is their child's special time with the dog and that they can observe quietly from nearby. Although there have been only rare instances of inappropriate behavior on the part of a child, the handlers have been trained in positive behavior management, and staff is always there for reinforcement and assistance.

A child who has signed up (with a signed permission slip from his/her parent or guardian) gets a reading log and reads with the Pet Partners. The child can select a book as well as the dog he or she wants to read with. It's up to the child how close he or she wants to sit to the dog. A few may want to sit with the handler between them and the dog, but most snuggle right up, get cozy, and start to read while softly petting their new canine reading buddy. The program works because the dogs are not judgmental, do not criticize, are in no hurry, and really like being with children. They are not too busy, do not have high (or any) expectations of a reader, or wish a child was any different than they are. They are not worried about bills, the next stop in a busy day, or any of the other issues that beset most parents. The handler plays the part of the dog's interpreter, and may say things like, "Kacie didn't understand that word--can you repeat it?" or "Walker wants to know what this part of the story means, can you explain it to him?" It takes very few minutes for most children to get comfortable reading, and that's when the magic begins. After the child finishes reading, they are usually allowed to give the dog a treat. Of course, the dogs are trained to take a treat very gently, and most kids are just tickled to be able to offer their friend a cookie. Then the child brings the reading log back to the desk and picks up a reminder card for the next time.

One young boy with a stutter wanted to sign up to read with the dogs. Even though the staff was patient with his disfluency, he had a very difficult time getting the words out. He chose a book, a dog, and his turn soon came up. His aunt sat at a nearby table where she could keep an eye on him but not intrude. At first his stutter continued as he read, but as the minutes passed, he seemed to become more relaxed. As I passed her table on my rounds of the department, I noticed that the woman had tears streaming down her face. When I asked if she was all right, she told me that she had never heard her nephew speak as fluently as he was able to with the dog. I listened and heard what sounded like any little boy reading pretty well. It was a far cry from the child who had such difficulty signing up--and this was in a matter of twenty minutes or so. His face just beamed when he was

allowed to give his dog a treat at the end of the session. This had to be the start of something good for this little fellow.

Recently I had a call from a teacher at one of the city schools. She taught a class that included a child who was visually impaired. She told me that he refused to read in class because he seemed to be embarrassed by his oversized, large print books. She asked his mother to bring him to the library for Paws for Reading, which she did. After he had been to several sessions, the teacher was calling to thank us. She jokingly asked us how to “turn him back off!” He had gained so much confidence that he was ready and willing to show off his reading anywhere, anytime, and had become a “real little chatterbox.” She was also interested in having the R.E.A.D.[®] dogs come to school for a special program.

Not all the readers that come to Paws for Reading are struggling. I helped a young teenage boy find a book “that the dogs might enjoy hearing.” We settled on *Dog of Discovery: A Newfoundland's Adventures with Lewis and Clark*, by Laurence Pringle. He read a couple of chapters to Vinny, patted him, and went on his way. Another little girl has decided that Walker is her “best friend.” When he doesn’t come to a Paws for Reading session, she makes sure to send a picture home to him signed, “Your best reading friend... .”

Sometimes observers are changed by Paws for Reading. One afternoon, several of our teen customers had gathered in the entry to the children’s department. They were testing the boundaries of acceptable behavior, and I noticed that some other customers were looking their way with less than welcoming expressions. I wandered over to the group, cheerfully greeted them, and asked how I could help them. The usual pointing, jostling, and disclaimers began.

“It wasn’t me, it was him!”

"She’s talking too loud!"

“Uh-oh, you’re in trouble!”

With a broad and innocent grin, I assured them that no one was in trouble, that I was just saying hello, and that maybe they’d like to come in and see what we have for them. It was about then that they noticed the dogs.

“That’s a K-9 dog!”

“He’ll bite!”

“That dog’s going to get you!”

“That’s a K-9 dog, isn’t it?”

They were plainly intrigued. I hushed the group and offered to take them on “a field trip” across the room to see the dogs. They lined up, just as if they were on a real field trip, and silently fell in behind me. We walked to a good vantage spot and watched Mary and Walker read with a child. When they finished, I brought the group over and introduced them. Mary greeted them as if they were adults (which instantly won them over) and explained the program, the training the dogs receive, and assured them that Walker was definitely not a K-9 dog. The group respectfully asked questions, listened attentively, and left peacefully when it was time for the next reader. Even from a distance, the magic of the relationship of a beautifully trained animal and his human companion was not lost on the group.

In summary, Paws for Reading is an ideal program that suits the library’s mission and vision when produced in collaboration with such highly reputable and respected organizations as ITA, the Delta Society, and MidSouth Therapy Animals.

Bibliography

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