

Canine Companions May Help Kids Learn to Read

By Maryann Mott for National Geographic News



- 1 Walk into a Salt Lake City public library on a Saturday afternoon and you might see something you didn't **expect**: children reading books to dogs. Three years ago, Intermountain Therapy Animals (ITA) started the R.E.A.D.® (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) program at the suggestion of board member Sandi Martin, a nurse and a long-time supporter of pets in hospitals, who had seen the positive effect animals can have on mentally and physically challenged¹ children. If therapy dogs help those children, thought Martin, who loves to read, then perhaps they can help kids who are **struggling** with reading, too.
- 2 The program is simple. For about 30 minutes each week, kids from five to nine years old read aloud to dogs of all shapes and sizes. The people **in charge of** the dogs sit nearby to help. Martin says children are more willing to read to dogs than to their classmates, in part because kids who stumble over² new words know their furry friends won't make fun of them. As a result, children's reading skills improve and their **self-esteem** grows.

¹ *mentally or physically challenged*: having a more difficult time with mental or physical skills than the average person

² *stumble over*: to have difficulty doing something; hesitate

- 3 Initially the R.E.A.D.® program was held in the main branch³ of the Salt Lake City library, but it has become so popular that all six branches now hold weekly sessions. Last year more than 500 children participated. Learning while having fun is what makes the program successful. ITA Executive Director Kathy Klotz explains that when people of all ages participate in therapy with animals, they stop thinking about what they can't do and focus on being with the dog.
- 4 ITA, based in Salt Lake City, has 250 Pet Partner® teams, 45 of which participate in the R.E.A.D.® program. To enter the program, teams go through a two-hour training course. Dogs are taught to look at the children's faces or at the books they are reading.
- 5 Handlers, the people who take care of the dogs, are given instructions. For example, instead of asking a child what a word means, the handler may say: "Rover⁴ doesn't know what that word means. Can you tell him?" This takes the pressure off the child if he or she doesn't know the answer, says Klotz.
- 6 Dogs also have a natural calming effect on humans. Studies have shown blood pressure⁵ and anxiety levels⁶ drop when people are around pets. "If kids who don't read well can relax enough to focus on learning, hopefully their reading will improve and they'll want to continue to read just for the pleasure of it," explains Martin.

³branch: something that is part of a larger system

⁴Rover: the name of a dog

⁵blood pressure: the measure of the force of the blood against artery walls. High blood pressure is a sign of a health problem.

⁶anxiety levels: how much stress a person experiences

A Close Reading

Circle the word(s) that completes the sentence correctly.

1. Children read to dogs.
2. Children like reading to the dogs because they laugh at them.
3. The R.E.A.D.® program is growing
4. Kids in the R.E.A.D.® program focus on
5. In the training program, dogs are taught to look at the faces or at the books they are reading.
6. Handlers kids what words mean.
7. If kids can relax more, their reading , and they will want to keep reading.

B Main Ideas

Circle ALL the correct answers for each question.

1. Who is this reading about?
 - a. nurses
 - b. dogs
 - c. people who are responsible for the dogs
 - d. children
2. What is the R.E.A.D.® program about?
 - a. teaching dogs to read
 - b. training dogs
 - c. helping children become better readers
 - d. increasing children's confidence
3. Where is this program?
 - a. at schools
 - b. in hospitals
 - c. at libraries
 - d. in parks
4. How often does this program occur?
 - a. once a week
 - b. twice a week
 - c. for 30 minutes
 - d. for 1 hour
5. Why is this program successful?
 - a. It's fun.
 - b. It's simple.
 - c. It's relaxing.
 - d. It's satisfying.