

Reading Confidence with “Tail Waggin’ Tutors”

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2017

Abstract: This report discusses the benefits of canine-assisted reading through the “Tail Waggin’ Tutors” program at the Glen Burnie Regional Library in Anne Arundel County, Maryland. Presented are the two different types of therapy dog interactions, Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) and Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA). The first canine-assisted reading program in the United States, “Reading Education Assistance Dogs” (“READ”) is discussed, along with why it is essential to have certified therapy dogs when running a canine-assisted reading program. Information is presented on therapy dog organizations and how the “Tail Waggin’ Tutors” program at the Glen Burnie Regional Library began.

Meeting Up with Canine Friends

Two young brothers eagerly enter the library on a brisk winter Saturday morning with a thoughtful selection of books clutched in their hands. They are not returning these books, but have carefully chosen titles from their own collection, and a stack of library books that they are borrowing, to read to their canine friends that visit the Glen Burnie Regional Library on the second Saturday morning of each month. “Tail Waggin’ Tutors,” a program that encourages young readers to practice their literacy skills by reading aloud to a trained therapy dog and handler, has pushed both boys to excel in their reading abilities. Seven-year-old Zach, who was eager to learn to read at a very early age, learned about the program at a summer reading event when he was four years old. The program motivated him even more to read early on. His younger brother Tyler, who is five years old, followed in the footsteps of his older brother by

also learning to read at an early age and has been participating in the program since the age of four. They both prepare for the second Saturday of each month by consciously choosing books that they think their canine friends will enjoy. This program has motivated both boys to read consistently and has given them the confidence to read aloud. They found a love for reading at a very early age and much of this is credited to participating in “Tail Waggin’ Tutors” through the Anne Arundel County Public Library System in the state of Maryland.

Canine-Assisted Reading

Children who participate in canine-assisted reading programs are likely to develop confidence in their reading skills and find reading to be more enjoyable (Siejka, 2016). While there has not yet been an extensive amount of data to be found to prove the effectiveness of children reading to therapy dogs at drop in library programs, a research study conducted by the Davis Veterinary Medicine Extension at the University of California found that school children who read to therapy dogs on a regular basis improve their reading fluency by 12 percent (Siejka, 2016). Studies that are available on library canine-assisted reading programs have found results for improvements in oral reading fluency and accuracy, along with significant increases in engaged reading time and significant improvements in reading skills, such as the ability to explain, describe, analyze, and infer (Fisher & Cozens, 2014). Children who feel self-conscious reading to an adult or peer, usually are very comfortable reading to a therapy dog. Children know that dogs will not judge their reading skills. Reading to a therapy dog can provide comfort, support, and happiness for struggling and self-conscious readers (Lane & Zavada, 2013).

Types of Therapy Dog Interactions

There are two different types of therapy dog interactions with humans, Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) and Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA). Both types of therapy dog interactions require a certified animal. The Delta Society, a non-profit therapy dog organization in Australia, provides the following definitions for AAT and AAA. Animal-Assisted Therapy is a goal-directed intervention in which an animal that meets specific criteria is part of a treatment process. These programs are usually directed and delivered by human health or human services. These professionals have specialized expertise within the scope of practice of their profession. This type of therapy is designed to improve human physical, social, emotional, and cognitive function. The therapy animals may be formally included in activities such as physical, occupational, or speech therapy. Specified goals and objectives are determined for each participant and their progress is evaluated and documented (Kirnan, Siminerio, & Wong, 2016). Animal-Assisted Activities provide opportunities for motivation, education, or recreation to enhance quality of life. AAA can be delivered in various environments, such as libraries, schools, or book stores. AAA are provided by specially trained professionals, paraprofessionals, and volunteers, along with animals that meet specific criteria. AAA are not usually tailored to individual people or medical conditions. Visit content can be spontaneous and length of visit times vary. Library canine-assisted reading programs typically utilize Animal-Assisted Activities interactions, due in large part to their drop-in nature. Children attending may or may not attend every program. The dog handler is volunteering and usually not a medical professional (Kirnan, Siminerio, & Wong, 2016). In canine-assisted reading programs, children choose their own material to read. The general goal is to boost reading skills, along with social skills. Children read for a short amount of time, usually around 15-30-minute time slots. The setting is very laid

back and comfortable, without observations from a professional measuring the effects and outcomes. Feedback and program effectiveness is provided by the caregivers and the children, along with program attendance rates. Caregivers or children may be asked to fill out a survey or verbally answer questions from the library staff relating to their satisfaction with the program. Surveys and answering staff questions are always voluntary and not mandatory. The use of therapy dogs to aid in reading development has been found to increase enthusiasm and interest in reading, along with improving self-esteem, reducing disruptive behaviors, and has led to improvement in reading and writing (Kirnan, Siminerio, & Wong, 2016).

READ: The First Canine-Assisted Reading Program

The first canine-assisted reading program in the United States began in the state of Utah in 1999. “Reading Education Assistance Dogs” (“READ”) was created by Sandi Martin, a nurse and board member of the International Therapy Animals (ITA) organization. After observing the positive benefits that therapy dogs brought to patients, she believed children could have positive outcomes with the presence of a therapy dog to improve reading skills. The original “READ” program took place in a library setting with a trained dog and dog handler. Sessions were arranged as 15-minute time slots with a ratio of one-to-one dog-to-client. The program was so successful that within the first year it was incorporated into the school system (Fisher & Cozens, 2014). Following the success of the original “READ” program, similar programs began to evolve all over the country: “Sit Stay Read” in Birmingham, Alabama; “Dogs Educating and Assisting Readers, DEAR” in Baltimore, Maryland; “Reading with Rover” in Bothell, Washington; and “Read to the Dogs” in Portland, Oregon. These are just a few of the state and local programs that came about following the READ program (Kirnan, Siminerio, & Wong,

2016). The various programs may differ, such as the age level of the children, length of one-on-one reading time, venue (public libraries, schools, book stores, childcare centers), selection of participants (self-selected, parents, teachers, or reading specialists), selector of reading materials, and ability level of the participants (Fisher & Cozens, 2014). However, they all have the same goal, to assist in developing a generation of young confident readers. While there is a lack of extensive scientific evidence, benefits from these programs are consistent to one another, reporting increases in self-confidence, enthusiasm for library visits, and interest in stories and reading (Kirnan, Siminerio, & Wong, 2016).

Certified Therapy Dogs are Essential

It is imperative for the success of canine-assisted reading programs to use certified therapy dogs and handlers. Therapy dog organizations ensure that the dogs are suitable and insured. Therapy dogs are insured against law suits when they are a member of a therapy dog organization and are in good standing (shots, training, and dues current). Their handlers are trained to handle various situations and follow rules established by the therapy dog organization to protect themselves, their therapy dog, and the clients they serve. All of this is very important for library canine-assisted reading programs to protect the library, dogs, handlers, and most importantly the children participating (Siejka, 2016). It is common for therapy dog organizations to have training standards in place for therapy dogs and handlers who will be working with children. They may also have their own process and procedure to help libraries establish canine-assisted reading programs (Lane & Zavada, 2013).

Therapy Dog Organizations

There are national therapy dog organizations that have specialized programs to train dogs and handlers to participate in canine-assisted reading programs. Local chapters of these organizations exist throughout the United States.

Therapy Dogs International

The non-profit volunteer organization Therapy Dogs International (TDI) was founded in 1976 in New Jersey. TDI is dedicated to regulating, testing, and the registration of therapy dogs and their volunteer handlers. TDI dogs are certified to visit nursing homes, hospitals, other institutions, and wherever else therapy dogs may be needed. TDI volunteers and handlers are present in all of the 50 United States and in some parts of Canada. “Tail Waggin’ Tutors” is TDI’s canine-assisted reading program. The main objective of the program is to provide a relaxed and “dog-friendly” atmosphere, which allows children to practice the skill of reading (Therapy Dogs International, 2017).

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Therapy Dogs International

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Website: <http://www.tdi-dog.org>

Intermountain Therapy Animals

Non-profit Intermountain Therapy Animals was the organization to launch the first canine-assisted reading program, “Reading Education Assistance Dogs” (“READ”), in 1999. The mission of this organization is to enhance quality of life through the human-animal bond. Since 1999 when the “READ” program launched, Intermountain Therapy Animals has trained more than 3,000 therapy teams (dogs and handlers) to work throughout the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Italy, Finland, France, Sweden, South Africa, Slovenia, and Spain (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2017).

Intermountain Therapy Animals contact information:

Intermountain Therapy Animals

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Website: <http://www.therapyanimals.org/Home.html>

Pet Partners

The nationwide non-profit organization Pet Partners came together almost 40 years ago to improve human health and well-being through the human-animal bond. The Pet Partners “Therapy Animal Program” was established in 1990 to ensure that dogs and handlers are well-prepared to participate in animal-assisted activity and animal-assisted therapy programs for therapy pets. “Read with Me” is Pet Partners canine-assisted reading program that promotes

literacy and instills a lifelong love of reading by having children read with therapy animals (Pet Partners, 2017).

Pet Partners contact information:

Pet Partners

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“Tails Waggin’ Tutors” at the Glen Burnie Regional Library in Anne Arundel County, Maryland

Jesse Roth, a librarian that worked at the Glen Burnie Regional Library, had been interested in bringing a canine-assisted reading program to the library for years. In the spring of 2014 she began researching to see what organizations were out there that supported such programs. Jesse learned about Therapy Dogs International (TDI) through a librarian at another Anne Arundel County Public Library branch that had been running a canine-assisted reading program for a few years. Jesse contacted TDI to begin the process of launching a program at the Glen Burnie Regional Library. She learned that TDI used the branding name “Tail Waggin’ Tutors” and inquired on what the library would need to do to participate. The library was required to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to ensure that the library followed the rules for participating. Once the MOU was signed, TDI emailed active volunteers in the area to let them know that the Glen Burnie Regional Library was seeking volunteers for the

program. The first “Tail Waggin' Tutors” program was held at the Glen Burnie Regional Library in September 2014 and has run as an (almost) monthly event ever since.

All volunteers for the program are affiliated with TDI, meaning their dogs are registered with the organization, have passed the K-9 Good Citizen test, and have all their shots. Initially most of the dogs/volunteers who signed up for the program had never participated in a canine-assisted reading program. They were experienced in doing hospital/nursing home visits, but felt that their dogs would be good candidates to work in an environment with children. Throughout the summer of 2014, Jesse received emails from area volunteers that were interested in the program. She was hoping to involve at least 3-4 regular volunteers for the Glen Burnie Regional Library location. This would ensure that at least one was available each month for the program. Volunteers were not expected to work every program. They could participate as much, or as little, as they wanted, so long as they responded to requests with "yes" or "no" and showed up when they said they would.

Once Jesse got responses from four volunteers, she brought them all in for a group meeting. This was so they could meet one another and she could discuss how the program would be run. This was a good opportunity to see if any of the dogs did not "click" or if there were any other issues/concerns that needed to be addressed. After meeting with the dogs/volunteers, Jesse also met with staff members that would help host the programs to make sure each month was ran consistently, no matter who hosted. The branch opted to run the program one Saturday morning each month to cater to working families that would not be able to make a weekday afternoon or evening program.

As is the nature of a volunteer-based program, commitment issues with volunteers is always a concern. Jesse handled most correspondence through email and would sometimes have

to follow-up with certain volunteers that were not as great about responding to requests to work an upcoming date. Communication issues aside, some volunteers found that the schedule, or location, was not working for them and asked to stop participating. Others had circumstances come up in their lives which forced them to pull out. Sadly, there was also the experience of how little time the library would have with some of the dogs. Two of the original canines passed away due to old age by the time the program reached its first anniversary. When the volunteer pool started to get low, Jesse would contact TDI to see if they could reach out to more area volunteers. Those that responded to the TDI request were then brought in to meet with Jesse, discuss the program, see the meeting room, and decide if they were willing to commit to the program. The Glen Burnie Regional Library, which is off a major road and easy to access from various parts of the county, has been able to sustain a pool of regular participants.

For the program to be effective, Jesse thought it would be ideal to have a 1-to-1 dog-to-child ratio, allowing the child to focus on the reading with minimal distractions. To ensure this ratio, she established pre-registration for each monthly program. To know how many slots to open for registration, it must be known how many dogs will be on hand. Jesse decided that each monthly program would run for 2 hours on a Saturday morning, which amounted to six 15-minute time slots with 5-minute transition periods built in. The transition periods were for both the volunteer/dog (bathroom/stretch breaks) and the children leaving/coming. Within each time slot, there are between 1-4 openings, depending on how many dogs/volunteers are available for that date. Dogs/volunteers are stationed in the corners of the room to make sure there is enough space for the dog, volunteer, and child, as well as less noise interference from people reading aloud nearby.

Jesse would email volunteers a few weeks ahead of the program to see if they could make the date. Once they said yes, they were asked to commit to the date, letting her know as soon as possible if they needed to cancel due to extenuating circumstances. If none of the regular volunteers were available, she would try to solicit help from another branch that ran the program. They were usually able to make it work in terms of having at least one dog available, but were prepared to cancel for that month if they could not find any dogs. Volunteers were asked to stay for the entire two hours, but could let Jesse know ahead of time if they could only do a portion of the program, in which case she would adjust the number of available time slots accordingly. When the number of dogs was known, Jesse could then put out the sign-up sheet for customers, which was ideally about a month before the date of the program. This allows parents and children to sign up for the next program while participating in the current program. The sign-up sheet asks for the name of the child, a parent name, and a phone number, so that someone from the library can call and remind customers the day before about their appointment. The information on the sign-up sheet also comes in handy if the program needs to be canceled, or if timeslots need to be adjusted, due to a volunteer dropping out, or if the library needs to close unexpectedly (Roth, 2017). Jesse has since transferred to another library in the Anne Arundel County Public Library system, but has passed the program on to another librarian at the Glen Burnie Regional Library. She has once again launched a canine-assisted reading program at her new library location.

Until Next Time, Canine Friends

Zach and Tyler were saying goodbye to their canine friends after fifteen minutes had flown by. Each dog had enjoyed the selection of books hand-picked by their reader. Zach and

Tyler showed off stickers given to them by the handler of the dog that each of them read to. The librarian encouraged them to pick out a prize from the treasure chest prize box. The box was overflowing with various notepads, books, and games. They were then invited to sign up for the next month. Instantly they began talking about what books they should read the next time. The two brothers decided they should go over to the children's section in the library and search for books that had dog characters. They both believed that their canine friends most enjoyed listening to stories about dogs. "Tail Waggin' Tutors" at the Glen Burnie Regional Library has helped to shape two very enthusiastic and confident readers. This program has encouraged both boys to visit the library often, read aloud, and have a love for reading at a very early age. The program has given them motivation to read consistently and confidence in their reading ability.

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