

<http://www.therapyanimals.org/read/article86.html#2>

The mission of the R.E.A.D.® program is to improve the literacy skills of children through the assistance of registered therapy teams as literacy mentors.

The Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) program improves children's reading and communication skills by employing a powerful method: reading to a dog. But not just any dog. R.E.A.D. dogs are 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.

Today, hundreds of registered R.E.A.D. teams work throughout the United States and Canada. R.E.A.D. is one of those ideas that, in the words of Bill Moyers, "pierces the mundane to arrive at the marvelous."

Intermountain Therapy Animals, a nonprofit organization, launched R.E.A.D. in 1999 as the first comprehensive literacy program built around the appealing idea of reading to dogs, and the program has been spreading rapidly and happily ever since

### **Please tell me about the R.E.A.D. program's mission and goals.**

The mission of our organization, Intermountain Therapy Animals, is to enhance quality of life through the human-animal bond. The mission of Reading Education Assistance Dogs® (R.E.A.D.®) is a logical extension of that—utilizing the companionship of therapy animals to build and encourage children's love of books and the reading environment, and providing an opportunity for them to practice the full range of communication skills. Research indicates that positive experiences like this will help lay the foundation for a lifetime of learning, and a higher quality life.

### **How exactly does the R.E.A.D. program work?**

In the library setting, it has worked several ways. When we introduced the program in the Salt Lake City main library in November of 1999, it was four weeks of "Dog Day Afternoons." Kids who signed up for appointments, and came to at least three of the four weekly sessions, were rewarded at the end with the privilege of selecting a brand new book to keep, which was then "pawtographed" by their favorite R.E.A.D. dog. This is a good way for a library to start out with a pilot test of the program. Since then, in the Salt Lake main library and five branches, we just have one R.E.A.D. team that spends two hours at each library every Saturday afternoon, and kids can decide spontaneously to read with the dog. It's a fun and popular activity, and would be classified as AAA or an animal-assisted activity. We now think that a special limited-time event, such as four weeks, or a once-a-month event, is the way to go, rather than ongoing indefinitely. It is a fact of human nature that when things stay special, they are appreciated more. When the dogs are an ongoing Saturday afternoon feature at the library, soon other special events start to be scheduled simultaneously, for example.

In the school setting, we ask the teacher or reading specialist to select those children who would most benefit from the program, and teams read with the same children each week, so that a more trusted and secure relationship evolves. This is AAT, or animal-assisted therapy, because specific goals are set for each child, documentation is kept, and progress is recorded. Sometimes this is done right after school; sometimes during the school day, but it involves a one-on-one experience with privacy or semi-privacy so that the child can blossom without the criticism of his/her peers. Each child spends about a half-hour with his dog—a few minutes getting acquainted and comfortable; time reading; then a few minutes at the end for tricks and treats and less formal play. They often sit together on the floor with big pillows, the dog sits or lies nearby, usually with some physical connection between dog and child, and we see what unfolds.

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. The handler can say, for instance, "Rover has never heard that word before, Jimmy—can you tell him what it means?" The possibilities are endless, and the child feels less embarrassed than when he is put on the spot. Meanwhile there are little games to play—the dog helps turn pages with his paw or nose, the child can give the dog a treat after completing a certain number of pages, etc. We encourage our teams to build on the unique personalities of both dog and handler, so each team develops their own singular "flavor," if you will.

The child is usually petting and stroking the dog while he is reading, which induces relaxation and lowers blood pressure and heart rate. And before you know it, the child forgets how hard he thinks reading is and starts to look forward to it. He comes running in with enthusiasm the next week saying things like: "Oh, Olivia, I have a story today that I know you're just going to love!"

### **What are the benefits of the R.E.A.D. program?**

Some of the documented benefits of therapy with animals include lowering of blood pressure and heart rate, increased relaxation, and a tendency to forget about pain and limitations. A research study almost 30 years ago found that when children get nervous, especially when talking to others, their blood pressure can rise very high, but that if a dog joins the scene, blood pressure will go down very low, whether the child and dog are sitting quietly together or whether the child is reading to the dog. We suspect part of that is because dogs are so trustworthy—people just know they don't have to be self-conscious or worried or embarrassed when they're with a dog.

Remember that even most adults are terrified of public speaking, and most of us have forgotten how daunting it is to have to expound in front of our peers. Often, kids who are learning to read get stressed, not because they aren't capable of reading but because they get nervous and self-conscious, they worry about making mistakes, they worry about looking dumb—and all those worries make it hard to focus. They dread reading in front of their friends, so they often "freeze up" and things just get worse.

When they read with a dog, right away they start to relax, and then they forget about feeling self-conscious or nervous, and pretty soon things start to flow a little better. Before they know it, they are enjoying the experience of reading instead of dreading it, they're even looking forward to the next time. It is simple, and it works beautifully! It also extends beyond the immediate reading experience—many teachers have noted that children who participate in the R.E.A.D. program start to raise their hands and speak out in class when they never could before.

Here are some of the documented benefits of interaction with therapy animals:

Researcher Aaron Katcher notes the following ways that a healthy therapeutic environment is actually created by the presence of an animal. It:

- draws attention outward
- turns off anxiety, anger and depression
- creates safety
- creates intimacy, and
- increases positive expectations of both self and others.

What's more, everyone in the environment experiences these changes—therapists, too!

Other researchers and sources have produced the following exhaustive list: Therapy animals provide comfort; reinforce learning; motivate speech; motivate movement and exercise; stimulate the senses; facilitate counseling; encourage positive social behaviors; foster feelings of safety and acceptance; enhance self-esteem; decrease loneliness; provide the opportunity for touch and for nurturing; provide the opportunity to give instead of receive; inspire people to smile, laugh and have fun; offer unconditional love/acceptance; normalize extremes in a healthy direction; cause

people to forget their pain and limitations by focusing outward; provide connections to home and a home-like environment.

Kids learn many things from the animals, in many different ways. One member of our group was a special education teacher whose therapy dog accompanied her to school almost daily. She said she could even use the dog to teach her kids PREPOSITIONS, because they were so fascinated by, and so focused on, the dog that their attention span was much longer, and she could demonstrate things like "about," "beyond," "Toward," or whatever, demonstrating with her dog, and the kids would really get it.

As for us with the R.E.A.D. program, all these things are seen. The kids relax into the situation, feel some joy and pleasure in the moment of experience, and begin to look forward to reading instead of focusing on their own inadequacies and dreading the idea.

The wonderful thing about the whole setting is that, just as trouble with reading is usually not a purely intellectual problem, the presence of the dog helps more than reading skills, too. The kids start coming to school more consistently, volunteering to read aloud in class, being late less often, turning in more homework assignments, showing improvements in self-esteem, forming trusting relationships ... the list just goes on! During the sessions there are unlimited opportunities to discuss things like pet safety, appropriate treatment of pets/animals, personal hygiene, and personal problems. The handlers are often surprised to find themselves in the role of therapist, hearing amazing revelations from these kids, which they then pass on to the proper school representative.

### **Are they learning about the dogs or are there other messages that come along with it?**

Yes, of course. We tend to use books with animal themes so that they are learning in all aspects of the process. They learn about dog behavior, responsible pet care, empathy and feelings, etc. The thing about dogs, and about reading, for that matter, is that NOT being able to read is seldom a purely intellectual problem. In fact, mostly it is a cultural or social or emotional difficulty—we are whole beings, and all the things we need to do and learn are not just isolated skills, but part of a whole context in ourselves. A lot of the kids we have worked with have home problems—domestic violence, or English is their second language, or simple unpredictability and instability, and they bring those problems to school with them, as you know. Dogs always present their whole selves in any situation—no pretense, no holding back, no pretending to be something other than what they are or feel at that moment. That kind of presence is very compelling for people in any therapeutic or learning situation.

So, the kids not only learn to enjoy the reading experience (first of all because the listener is attentive and does not judge or criticize or make fun or tell the child's friends when they make a mistake), then they look forward to it, and then it starts to spill over to other things—they start holding their heads up a little higher, they start coming to school more often, they start completing more homework assignments in other subjects ... it's really quite remarkable what happens!

### **How does reading to an animal help raise a child's self-esteem?**

There are some obvious ways, such as the fact that lots of focused practice will increase someone's skill and therefore their confidence, and being listened to and treated with respect validates a child and contributes to their self-esteem. There are also some less obvious ways. We soon began to notice that most children consistently turn the book toward the dog so s/he can see the pictures and understand the story. We learned something important from this, that the kids were getting enormous satisfaction from being the teacher for awhile. Here is someone (the dog) who knows even less about reading than they do, and the opportunity to feel useful and competent, and help someone else understand, really contributes to the child's experience of validation and self-worth. You can almost watch them blossoming in front of your eyes.

One ten-year-old girl we met could hardly read at all—not even as well as an average first-grader. She gave the handler all kinds of reasons why she couldn't and didn't want to read to Meg, the

dog. The handler reassured her that Meg wasn't going to be bothered by any of those things, and eventually they sat down to read together. It was a real struggle for this girl, but she became very engrossed in the book and kept at it, with Meg listening beside her. It took her 45 minutes to read just one 32-page picture book with simple words, but when she turned over to the last page she gasped in happy surprise, "Oh my gosh! I'm finished—I've never read a whole book before, ever in my life!" She got to go home that day with a singular accomplishment. That's the kind of experience that helps to build self-esteem—when someone accomplishes something important, conquers challenges, feels their skills increasing. The dogs can help support these things in situations where other people, even well-trained, very loving people—somehow can't achieve that important break-through.

### **How did this program come to be?**

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 the 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. It's clearly one of those "lightbulb" ideas that seems so brilliant, it's a wonder someone hadn't thought it up long before.

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

### **Are there any studies in education that support the need for such a program?**

The statistics about reading are perennially discouraging. The American Library Association estimates that there are 27 million functionally illiterate adults in the United States. 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. Both Barbara and Laura Bush have been champions of reading. Recently Laura has said, "It's a struggle that affects every American. If our children are not able to read, they are not able to lead." Or learn. Or progress in our society. If you look at Amazon.com, you will see that they list no less than 2,047 nonfiction titles pursuing the critical skill of teaching reading. Despite this outpouring of attention and concern at every level, we don't seem to be making sufficient progress to turn the tide.

### **What makes the R.E.A.D. program different from the many pet therapy programs?**

It may not be different at all, except that occurs in the reading arena instead of a more typical health care institutional setting. In general, we have made a concerted effort to acquaint therapists with the value of AAT and have pushed our interactions way beyond mere visits (though those have therapeutic benefits as well) to serious involvement in the therapeutic regimens of our clients. We push to get the ratio of dog-to-client to one-on-one, because that's where the most powerful changes happen. The same is true for R.E.A.D.—if the children were to sit in a group and take turns reading to the dog, that would defeat the whole purpose. Many children fear reading precisely because they are afraid to make mistakes in front of their peers, don't want to be thought stupid, and don't want to be criticized or made fun of for a speech impediment

### **What kind of pre/post testing do the R.E.A.D. teams use, especially if the program is considered AAT and documentation is essential?**

We find the best way to do testing is to get permission from the school to see the reading scores that the school itself takes periodically. When you have a good collaborative program going, high trust and assurances of confidentiality, school personnel are generally willing to share such results. We feel there is less bias this way—since we don't design the testing process we can't

build in biases that favor our outcomes. You can see the progress of the kids who participate in R.E.A.D. right alongside the rest of their classmates' results.

### **How do you measure the success of the program?**

In libraries, they measure it by the kids' enthusiasm and attendance. If they love it, they keep scheduling us again like any successful special event. That's one reason we've decided we prefer not to be a permanent fixture there—it becomes commonplace and therefore less appreciated; with regular, ongoing programs they schedule OTHER special events on top of us sometimes! So now we're cutting back to four-week programs a couple of times per year, or once-a-month sessions.

In schools, we just look at the test scores of the kids who are participating. We figure it's the most credible if we go with the school's own testing instruments. We have a form for that you'll see in the training package, too. Most schools are happy to cooperate with our data-gathering—we just use first names in our records.

### **What kind of qualities do the R.E.A.D. animals possess?**

A good Reading Education Assistance Dog (or cat) is, first of all, a registered, tested and insured therapy animal. This means they have been screened for skills and temperament, health and cleanliness, good manners and attitude. They are animals who people can't resist approaching; they inspire confidence and trust in the people around them. They are calm and reliable, obedient, and impeccably groomed to be attractive and fun to touch and stroke. They enjoy children, and like curling up on the floor with them to hear stories.

### **What type of animals are involved in the program?**

We have dogs of all sizes who participate, from little terriers to giant mastiffs. Temperament is more relevant than size. We also have R.E.A.D. cats, bunnies and guinea pigs for those who prefer the company of alternative creatures. And just recently an African Grey parrot has become a R.E.A.D.er!

### **Why does it have to be a registered therapy dog and not just a pet? Do you ever use dogs that are from shelters?**

We advocate registered therapy animals for many reasons. The testing has shown that each particular animal has the appropriate skills and temperament to do the job; the owner has demonstrated great responsibility and willingness to train and care for their animal; and each animal has liability insurance, which is a great comfort to all concerned—owners, facilities and clients.

Although many of our therapy animals came from shelters to their current homes, we feel that taking animals straight from a shelter to do therapy work is just another source of confusion and stress for those who are already taxed to their limits. It is not fair to shelter animals to be used in that way.

## **Can my dog and I just do it alone—does there have to be a therapy group in place in my area?**

Many people have become the first in their community to register with their animals as a therapy team; there is no reason a R.E.A.D. team could not operate independently, as well. With fewer teams you just see fewer children.

Often the handler will use projection, communicating through and for the animal, to teach concepts and to help overcome obstacles. This approach is more appealing to the child and more effective because s/he doesn't feel targeted or pressured. For example, if a child reads a word but doesn't know what it means, the handler might say, "Gee, I don't think Rover has ever heard the word 'interactive' before—can you tell him what it means?" If he knows, great; if he doesn't, they can get a dictionary together and learn the new word and explain it to the dog. This is less direct and intimidating than, "Do you know what that word means?" a direct question which a child may shrink from.

A lot of the magic in this program revolves around letting the child focus on the dog. When s/he thinks s/he's helping the dog understand the words and the story, the child gets the empowering feeling of being the helper and teacher—rather than having the whole experience focus on the child's lack of skill. This critical shift in focus makes an incredible difference in the flow of the child's learning processes. It's much more fun to read with a friend who listens attentively, and does not judge, than to read for your teacher, in front of your peers.

## **How does the presence of the handler not interfere in the child-dog relationship, or inhibit the child reader?**

It's been documented in many therapeutic settings that when an animal is present in therapy, people tend to forget about the other humans and their inhibitions disappear. It's why they often are considered powerful bridges for people who are suffering the after-effects of emotional or sexual abuse. They don't trust anyone and won't talk, but when an animal is introduced, they find it trustworthy and suddenly will open up (therapist still present) and talk about lots of things the therapist needs to hear but which they were previously unwilling to share.

Something similar happens in the reading setting. Of course, the handler is ALSO a supportive, positive, uncritical listener. The handler fulfills a crucial role in the process, in encouragement, helping the reader "help the dog understand"—which the kids are eager to do—it takes pressure off them and helps their abilities flow. They also work with comprehension, using the dictionary, etc..

## **What makes a child eligible for the program?**

In the library programs, any interested child (generally K–6) is welcome to read to the animals. Because kids can't really be selected for reading ability, it tends to be a more social and casual way to use the program to help kids have positive experience with books, reading and the library.

In the school programs, children are selected by their teachers and reading specialists as those who would most benefit from this type of intervention—kids who lack confidence, have difficulty with English (especially if they are not native speakers), kids with short attention spans, kids whose reading scores are well below average for their age and grade.

In the classroom setting, we DON'T want kids to think they've been selected or singled out because of their inadequacies—one more thing to make them feel bad. We tend to bring several therapy dogs into the class, give them a presentation about what therapy dogs do in other settings, and then the teacher asks if anyone would enjoy spending time reading with one of these dogs. Usually it's unanimous, and then of course the teachers can select a subgroup of kids who get to do the program and it can be designed to look more like a reward than a remedial program, so they feel special rather than singled-out negatively.

Criteria for selection do not need to be strictly or narrowly defined—it all depends on the facility and the population. One teacher has just one visiting team, and she likes all her first-graders to participate, so they cycle through about five or six children each week and then start all over again, so each child is participating once every five to six weeks. The teacher keeps the handler informed about what each child needs most that week and they work on that together.

And while we initially concentrated on children K–3, we have already been asked to target different groups. In some schools they select older children (grades 4-6) from several classes for an after-school program. The school's reading specialist supervises the group, and the same 10-12 kids come each week to get 20-30 minute sessions with the same dog for a whole semester or whole school year. Three to four teams participate. Their selection criteria include kids who may be suffering from some terrible home situation (split, poverty, domestic violence) and/or kids who are immigrants learning English. In one particular school there were a lot of kids from Bosnia, some of whom have even watched relatives be murdered in front of their eyes, so they're dealing with post-traumatic stress as well.

We have begun a R.E.A.D. program with adolescent boys in a lock-down facility, where we use books with "high interest/low vocabulary." These boys already have damaged egos and don't need to be further patronized by trying to read children's picture books, even though their reading skills are woefully below par. We have been approached by Head Start, and we are planning to work with them to determine how to prepare pre-school kids to look forward to learning to read. There is really no child who couldn't benefit from the R.E.A.D. setting. We even got a letter from one mom who said her daughter is an excellent reader and they go to the library every weekend, but she is really eager to spend time with the dogs because they live in an apartment and can't have pets, so for her, it's the opportunity to hang out with the dogs that just enhances the library experience even more.

Parental approval is always obtained before any child is allowed to participate in the program.

One school told us that a little six-year-old boy walked into the principal's office and stated, "I want to be one of the kids who gets to read to the dogs—where do I sign up?" Don't we wish that we had enough teams so everyone who wanted to could be included!

### **How do you handle various cultural sensitivities?**

We try to get relevant information like this from the teacher or staff before ever starting, but sometimes we learn as we go. One little boy always wanted to be around the dogs but he kept his hands clasped behind his back. The handlers, thinking he was perhaps frightened, reassured him that the dogs were friendly and encouraged him to touch them. He replied that it was not permitted, in his religion, to touch animals. The handlers were surprised, but upon asking the teachers found out that, indeed, he belonged to a particular Muslim sect that didn't permit touching animals. The boy continued to be interested in seeing the dogs but very carefully avoided touching

them. The parents had given permission for his visual participation, and the handlers respected his boundary.

### **Do the kids get to choose an animal to read to?**

Sometimes. It depends on how many teams are participating in a particular location at a specific time. If only one dog comes, then that's the dog they read with.

### **Do the kids tend to respond better to a large or small dog?**

Everyone has their own preferences; we haven't seen anything that universally favors one over the other. We have dogs ranging from 180 lb. mastiffs to 2 lb. Yorkies, and there is always someone who wants and needs just what each one can offer. Small dogs are nice for curling up in laps, of course, but often small ones are less happy around children, so the preference of the DOG is always of prime importance, as well. With large ones, they themselves can become cushions or reclining rest spots, or they can lay their head in the child's lap. Both provide sensory stimulation. Really, it's ultimately a matter of the right personality, skills and temperament for each situation. Young, active labs are great for rehab patients who need to exercise their arm, or for teenage boys in detention programs who aren't physically disabled but are looking for lots of action and fun. Older, couch-potato types tend to be good for the R.E.A.D. program. The dog who taught special ed kids was a Sheltie, small and agile enough to navigate the classroom, but some Shelties aren't at all comfortable around children ... See what we mean? There is no standard "right" answer to this one.

### **Have any of the children had negative reactions to the dogs?**

No, not so far! Sometimes children are initially afraid of big dogs, but we can always help them get to know each other and overcome their fears. We never force any interaction, of course.

### **What about allergies?**

Our animals are scrupulously clean and well-groomed before each session, which helps. In addition, they use a wonderful product (Nature's Miracle Dander Remover and Body Deodorizer) which helps to lessen the likelihood of any allergic reaction for several hours. If a child suffers from severe allergies or asthma, the R.E.A.D. program would probably not be appropriate or enjoyable.

### **How do I select appropriate books to read?**

We include a booklist chock-full of appropriate book choices for children of various ages. New books are arriving almost daily, so it's always a great idea to consult with teachers and librarians about the best, most up-to-date choices.

### **Who chooses the book(s) to read? Does the dog ever bring his favorite stories?**

Yes, the dog brings his favorites! Some teams have the kids autograph their dog's favorite book as an ongoing "scrapbook" of memories for themselves. We actually bring a rolling suitcase packed full of books every week, for them to choose from. The teachers and librarians also often have lots of books selected, out on display and available.

But this is another area where pre-discussions with the teacher and/or reading specialist are invaluable. You need to have the right level books for each child—not too hard, not too easy. You need to make sure they don't just read the same one over and over each week so that it gets easier for them in a spurious way. (It helps to take notes on each child—for these reasons, and also because they are so thrilled when you remember things about each one of them from session to session.)

**Do you find certain kinds of books are more popular than others? For that matter, do you select the reading material or does the school/library?**

Well, we're kind of biased toward books about animals!! And there's certainly no shortage of those. We also try to make sure that the books we use represent animals and our stewardship of them in the most positive way.

We bring along a cache of books in a rolling suitcase, so kids can pick from those if they want. But in school, we also consult with the teacher or reading specialist to make sure we're using books at an appropriate level for each child we work with (not too easy, a bit of a stretch but not so hard they bog down, either). At the library, the librarians are so excited about the program they usually put out a display on the days we're coming. The important thing is to have a good, collaborative relationship going with the staff you work with to help with this sort of thing—at the library it includes having posters and flyers in advance to advertise the program, putting pawprints on the floor the days of the program, etc.

Also, we do have our own NEW books along because, when a child in the school programs completes ten books, we let him select a new book to keep from our stash, and then we have "his" therapy animal pawtograph it for him to keep. There's a study out there that says children who haven't learned to read well often have quite spartan or deprived home situations, and having a new book of their own is a precious commodity that they really appreciate. So we don't use thrift-shop books—we solicit donations of new ones from bookstores, etc. Or get them from grant money.

**Does the handler ever read to the child and the dog?**

Yes, at the libraries, especially. Some kids are too young to read yet, or too scared, so the handler warms them up by helping. Sometimes a book is a bit too challenging, perhaps, so they take turns reading pages.

We've also had some kindergarten-level kids, so we pack along a few alphabet books (there are lots of them that feature animals!) and even some sponge alphabet letters, if things get that basic. It's kind of a fun variation, actually.

**Do many children participate in the R.E.A.D. sessions? How many are allowed at each session?**

This varies in every program and setting. The best of all worlds is having just one child at a time reading to each dog.

The whole point of R.E.A.D. is to give each child a private opportunity to practice and enjoy reading, away from his peers. Children who have difficulty reading often fear making mistakes in front of their friends and classmates. They have told us they worry their friends may think they are

stupid. With a dog, there is no criticism or judgment, and no laughter if a mistake is made. So it's not so intimidating.

### **How long and how often do you think is necessary for it to be of real value to the children?**

In the libraries, we try to give each child about 15-20 minutes. In the schools, the sessions are usually 20-30 minutes on a weekly basis, including a little warm-up time and maybe a couple of treats and tricks afterwards, if that seems appropriate. Consistency and the building of a trusting relationship are essential to the therapeutic process. When those things are established, the children know they have something to count on and want to rise to the occasion, too, and make sure they don't miss their appointments. Less often makes it hard to establish a pattern and have them remember and look forward to it.

### **What kind of an environment do you set up for these sessions?**

The environment should be comfortable and semi-private—within view for safety's sake but a bit out of sight and earshot of the others. The reading kids sometimes have big floor-sized pillows or beanbag chairs, as well as individual quilts, blankets or pads that the handlers bring in to help define a space for their dog. Positions vary, depending on the three parties involved (child, dog, handler). Sometimes they're down on their tummies, sometimes the dog has his head in the child's lap, sometimes the child reclines on the dog.

### **Do the sessions begin/end with a time to just chat or play with the dog?**

Absolutely—it's very important to warm up for the session and assess the child's emotional state, how he is feeling about the dog, etc. Talk about what a therapy dog is; talk about the dog—his breed, where he came from, what he enjoys; talk about the incentives, like earning books; learn a bit about the child. And it's important to have a break at the end, maybe let the child offer a treat to the dog, etc.

That said, we do try to remind our handlers to keep their focus on reading, not on playing tricks or catch or otherwise getting too far off base, which is often very tempting for everyone.

### **Does it matter if the dog isn't always attentive?**

If the dog is restless, moves around a lot and tries to get up frequently, we take a potty break or offer a drink. Occasionally a session must end early if the dog is having a "bad day." Children understand this quite easily.

When a dog falls asleep during a session, sometimes we tell the child that he is just closing his eyes so he can concentrate better on the story. If the dog starts to snore, this doesn't always work! In that situation, one handler told the child that she should feel very proud, because she always read a story to her dog at bedtime to help him go to sleep, and she had managed to be just as effective. The next time it happened, the little girl looked up at the handler with a shy and glowing smile, saying gently, "I read Buster night-night!"

We try to teach the dogs a "focused attention" command (e.g., "Look!") to get them to look straight at the book sometimes. This is effective. But the children get a lot of satisfaction from reclining against the dog, having their arm around him, or just petting and stroking while reading—he doesn't have to be paying attention every moment for the good things to happen.

### **Is there any reward system in place for progress goals to be met by the students?**

Rewards can be any number of things. We have big bone bookmarks, and each week when a child completes a book they put a sticker on their bookmark, or a pawprint stamp, etc. After they've completed ten books, they get to choose a new book from our collection to keep for their very own, and their dog "pawtographs" it for them.

There are studies that show children from deprived backgrounds have very few books, so giving them the opportunity to choose their very own shiny new one, is extremely valuable and influential. We get new books donated, and preferably hardbacks, so they seem really important and substantial (as opposed to used hand-me-downs). It is a big hit.

### **What are the costs associated with the R.E.A.D. program (like books, uniforms, program costs, advertising)?**

The R.E.A.D. program doesn't cost much more than our programs in other healthcare facilities. The cost of uniforms (t-shirts for the person, bandanas for the dog, and ID tags) are covered by people's membership dues, and many books are donated to us by bookstores. We don't spend any money on advertising or soliciting places to do our programs. Teachers and librarians hear about R.E.A.D. through various sources and then call us about it. We do spend some money on printing to reproduce articles and information about R.E.A.D. to send to people in other states who have requested it.

### **Is there a cost to schools, libraries or other facilities associated with the program?**

The R.E.A.D. program, as all of our animal-assisted therapy programs, is free of charge to all clients and facilities. However, as a nonprofit organization we are always grateful for donations and many facilities do make them. Also, we accept donations of books for the program from various sources.