

Therapy Dogs Motivate Students to Develop Reading Skills

Karen and Sandy sit quietly in the library at Hope Elementary School, waiting for their first student to arrive. Every week, they visit the school to read with some of the “shy” first and second grade readers. Valeria, who is 8 years old, has been reading with Karen and Sandy for the last three months. Bounding into the room with a smile on her face, Valeria says, “This is the best part of the day.” Part of her enjoyment comes from reading to Sandy, who is in fact a dog.

Karen Lee Stevens, founder and president of All for Animals, and Sandy, a white Labrador retriever, have been providing educational presentations to young students for years. With the help of an Express Grant from the Santa Barbara Foundation, Karen recently launched a pilot program called ARF! (Animals + Reading = Fun!) at Hope Elementary School. Six trained therapy dogs – Buddy, Lucky, Olivia, Pedro, Sandy, and Zoe – accompany their human companions each week to read with first and second grade students to support them in becoming better readers. Students spend 20 minutes with their canine companions, enough time to read anywhere from one to four books. “Kids in the program are reluctant readers – they don’t normally enjoy reading out loud to their teachers or peers. But when they are reading to a dog, they are motivated and excited. Because, really, who would not want to read to a furry friend?” said Karen.

National research has shown that children who read to dogs dramatically increase their reading and comprehension skills. And while results from ARF! will not be assessed until the end of the school year, positive changes are already evident. “Parents tell me that children come home and are absolutely thrilled. They look forward to the day they get to meet up with their dog friend,” said Barbara LaCorte, principal at Hope Elementary School. “We know that motivation is a key part of staying in school. If students are excited to come to school, excited to read, these are ingredients for student success.”

Through ARF!, dogs and their human companions have the opportunity to make a positive impact on the community – an impact that is seen every day in the smiling faces of the students who come to school motivated and ready to learn. “Educational research targets first and second graders for reading intervention programs so that students can be fluent and comprehending by the end of third grade,” said Barbara. “Up to the end of third grade, children are learning to read and then after that, children are reading to learn. Strong reading skills will determine each child’s ability to learn what they need to become productive, confident adults.”



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