Library Trends:
R.E.A.D.: Improving Reading ability with Assistance Dogs

A few years back a woman was attempting to figure out a way to put her passions together for the good of the community in a new way. Sandi Martin, that woman, came to found R.E.A.D. (Reading Education Assistance Dogs). Ms. Martin, a critical care nurse and works as the manager of Community Outreach and Volunteer Services at the University of Utah Hospital. She worked very closely with the Salt Lake City Public Library to bring dogs with an aptitude for “reading” to children who needed a friend and non-judgmental partner for reading practice.

Debuting in November of 1999, the initial effort lasted four weeks for one half hour per week. It has been estimated that more than 800 students have experienced a reading with a team (Martin).

Salt Lake’s “Dog Day Afternoons” are offered at branches around the city and over 45 dogs and their trainers participate in the program (Mott) as described on the Salt Lake Public Library web site, “Kids are invited to read to therapy animals in a positive, non-threatening, fun environment. No registration needed, just come and pick your favorite book and a dog for a terrific experience!” The teams meet at seven branches of the system every Saturday. In the school setting the teams work for 20 minutes per week with students over a 16 week term.

Ms. Martin is also deeply involved with the Intermountain Therapy Animals organization, Utah’s oldest and largest organization committed to the use of animals for therapy purposes. This organization hosts and entire websection devoted to the R.E.A.D. program. They are the proud recipients of a Bernard and Audre Rapoport Foundation grant to assist in expanding the program. The program is also endorsed by the DELTA Society. “Delta Society is the leading international resource for the human-animal bond. Delta Society has been the force to validate the important role of animals for people's health and well-being by promoting the results of research to the media and health and human services organizations.” (Delta Society). All canines in the program must be Intermountain Therapy Association or DELTA certified to enter the program and handlers must be willing to work variable hours.

The program, in Utah, launched a study in March of 2000 starting with 10 children to confirm the anecdotal improvement that had been observed. In a telephone interview Ms. Martin expressed the importance, not just of improved reading skills, but also of the overall impact on students. “We have found from our conversations with the social
workers who work with these children that they also have decreased absenteeism, and increased self-confidence." Each student is worked with for about 20 to 30 minutes per visit and the visits occur once a week. The students are observed to be more relaxed and able to concentrate on the “tasks at hand with a furry friend for support” (Martin). A critical note is that many of the children served are not English proficient, but English as a Second Language (ESL) students from the European continent. They have been emotionally traumatized as well as meeting social challenges of assimilating into a new culture.

The anecdotal observations of the success of this program indicate that an approximate increase of two grade levels in reading proficiency is the average and increased social ease and these figures were confirmed by the 13-month study launched in March of 2000. At this time, according to Ms. Martin, there is a process of ongoing data collection. “Over a 16-month period, participating students experienced significant improvements in their reading levels, increasing an average of one-and-a-half to two levels. One student’s reading level jumped from 3.4 to 6.8; another has increased from 3.2 to 5.8” (Pipe).

“Reading to Rover” and “Paws on Reading” are programs loosely based on the R.E.A.D. program and many others are criss-crossing the nation. These programs all report success and improved reading skills.

I would content that a long-term and scientifically designed study of any of these types of programs should be undertaken to verify the veracity of the current body of anecdotal information and the one short term study. The study of this type of program, and actual statistical proof of its effectiveness, would provide the necessary documentation for many schools and programs to begin funding and training for similar programs in their schools or libraries.

Hard numbers would enable grant writers, others involved in the budgetary process of organizations to justify the expenses, and educational time the program would require to be successful for students. Funding is always a challenge and usually the largest hurdle for innovative and new programs to overcome. Electronic reading programs funded hard number studies that shed positive light on their effectiveness. If such hard number studies could be completed on R.E.A.D. and other programs like it grant dollars would begin to flow and Title One programs could justify the use of this type of intervention.

The most important factor in a program of this nature, in my opinion, is the human connection and the unconditional love that the students involved will receive from their team. It is pointed out in several of the sources I explored that the children have a boost in self-confidence that
is linked directly to their contact with the therapy dogs. This theme of love and interaction cannot be undervalued in the increased performance of these children. They may be suffering due to family crisis or peer tormenting but the unconditional love and respect of the R.E.A.D. team is a huge consideration in the scheme of increased performance and self-confidence.

I believe with hard statistical data the opportunity to expand this type of program into more schools and libraries offers unlimited prospects for teachers and students to find new and innovative ways that the therapy dogs can influence struggling students. Just the positive feelings the students experience from having “someone” really happy to see them once a week may improve the life of some students.

Bibliography

Martin, Sandi. Telephone interview. 3 April 2003.


Other sites and sources of information germane to the topic
Utah News from KSL-TV, Salt Lake City, Utah
Transcript of the kick off news coverage from November of 1999 when the Intermountain Therapy Association started the R.E.A.D. program.

R.E.A.D. Brochure from Intermountain Therapy Association
An explanatory brochure produced by the Intermountain Therapy Association to enlighten individuals about the R.E.A.D. program and its benefits.

Hand-In-Paw
Birmingham Public Library’s version of the program is called “SIT, STAY, READ” and is run as a summer program in two branches of the library in conjunction with Hand-In-Paw, a Delta Society affiliate.

Throughspecialeyes
Sasha tells her story as she prepares and goes to school to help kids read. Written from a dogs point of view this enchanting tale about tail wagging and fun lends itself to understanding that therapy dogs get as much as they receive.

Kids Relax Reading To Dogs
Jefferson, Wisconsin, librarians want the power of positive experiences to influence their readers. The main thrust of their program is to rekindle a love of reading.

Reading program goes to the dogs
Pennsylvania has Paws with Patients and a National Education Association senior analyst offers her opinion of the program. Inspired by the R.E.A.D. program in Utah they focus on allowing students a chance to increase fluency.

OnlineAthens: Athens Life: Assistance dogs help unleash kids' reading potential 09/02/02
Athens, Georgia, kicks of its “Reading to Rover” program in September 2002. The program loosely based on R.E.A.D. program is planning to provide non-judgemental reading times on Sundays for their younger patrons.

Columbia Missourian: Dogs give kids forgiving audience
Reporter Megan Clark covers Cole, who loves the library and books, but has one problem, Cole cannot read. Cole is a reading assistance dog working in the Columbia Public Library.

ABCNEWS.com : 21st Century Lives: Literacy Advocate
Peter Jennings profiles Sandi Martin and her R.E.A.D. program for his special series of reports on life in the 21st century. The program originally aired October 27, 2000.

**READ Program increases education through dog partners**

Montgomery, Texas, middle schooler’s will have some interesting visitors to their classrooms in the spring of 2003 as the R.E.A.D. program comes to a classroom near them.