

Thursdays with MacGyver

The Benefits of a Library Therapy Dog

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All photos courtesy of Alison Francis

The benefits of therapy dogs in various settings have been well established. But more recently, the use of dogs in libraries where children read out loud has been on the rise.

The benefits of this type of reading include greater comfort reading aloud, a sense of pride, an increase in self-esteem, and in one pilot study, decreased absenteeism.

LaGrange Library in Poughkeepsie, New York, began a reading dog program in late 2008, and it has been highly successful. Participants and their parents report many of the above benefits as well as the overall sense of fun in reading and interacting with the therapy dog.

This program is held on Thursdays from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.; each child preregisters for a fifteen-minute time slot to read to four-legged friend MacGyver, a German shorthaired pointer, owned by Peg Basso. Since Basso volunteers her time, the program costs nothing and requires only a small, quiet area in the library. Therapy dogs and their owners can be found through organizations that specialize in facilitating these and other kinds of programs. The program has been so popular that we



Loyal MacGyver and his owner Peg Basso.

will continue it next school year and maybe even add an additional afternoon.

How the Program Began

I first became aware of kids reading to therapy dogs a few years ago when I did an independent study for my graduate work on the subject of bibliotherapy.

I was very interested in the therapeutic use of books with children and young adults. During my research of the various methods of using books with young people to explore personal issues, I stumbled upon a website that described the beneficial effects on children who read to trained therapy dogs—R.E.A.D., Reading Education Assistance Dogs, is a program of Intermountain Therapy Animals.

I was interested in doing something like this at our library when Basso called me one day to ask if I would be interested in having her and MacGyver come to the library to volunteer in some capacity. I pitched the idea to her about having kids read to her dog, and she enthusiastically agreed. MacGyver has been a registered therapy dog with the organization Therapy Dogs International (TDI) since 2000.



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Basso and MacGyver have been volunteering in a variety of settings including hospitals, a library in New Jersey where they used to live, at a Montessori school, a mental health outpatient facility, and here at LaGrange Library.

Therapy Dogs International is another volunteer group organized to train and provide qualified handlers and their therapy dogs for visitation in a variety of settings. “Tail Waggin’ Tutors” is one of TDI’s many programs where handlers and their trained, registered dogs visit school libraries and public libraries where children read to the dogs.

TDI is another organization that librarians may contact to request a handler and dog in their geographic area. Dogs registered with TDI have been tested and certified to be safe in a therapeutic or, in this case, library setting.



MacGyver’s owner Peg Basso reads with young Jessica at the LaGrange Library in Poughkeepsie, New York.

Program Set-up and Structure

The beauty of this program is that it is virtually cost free. Basso volunteers her time, and there is no materials cost since each child brings a book of her choice when she attends. Sessions are held during the library’s normal operating hours, so no additional personnel costs are incurred.

Basso and MacGyver come one afternoon each week for a two-hour session. I made a schedule of eight fifteen-minute time slots for which each child must pre-register. Requiring preregistration, rather than using a drop-in format, makes the program run more smoothly. Kids can register for one fifteen-minute time slot for multiple weeks if they like. Kids can register in person or by phone to reserve a space.

I also established ground rules: one child at a time reads to the dog, the child needs to come prepared with a book, and the parent must stay in the room during the session.

Our sessions are held in a quiet little nook in the children’s room. We have a cozy corner behind a bookshelf in our children’s room. This affords some privacy in case the reader feels self-conscious, and it cuts down on distractions for both the dog and the child. Five to seven children come regularly each week, and the group comprises two boys and five girls, ages six through eleven.

One possible pitfall I’ve noticed is other children who come into the children’s area make noise or want to interrupt the session

to pet the dog. Overall, most parents who accompany their children have them stay away from the reading area.

My Observations

During the sessions, I sit at my desk across the room from the corner where the activity takes place, and I am available for assistance.

I have noticed that having a dog in the room seems to create an atmosphere of relaxation and openness. Everyone, even patrons not involved in the program, want to come pet the dog. It encourages conversation—everyone has a dog story to tell, and Basso is wonderful at putting the kids at ease.

She is actively involved with each child who reads. She comments on the story, asks questions, talks to MacGyver, encourages the readers, and helps out with difficult words. The kids who have registered come early and are enthusiastic about reading. Sometimes a few children will sit nearby awaiting their turn, and I have also noticed that the reader usually does not mind that other kids are watching. In addition, the kids who are waiting have been very patient and considerate of the reader. Reading to the dog seems to encourage consideration for others.

The kids seemed to become immediately attached to MacGyver; they routinely greet MacGyver with great enthusiasm and affection; one girl and her mother bring her homemade biscuits; one boy actually stopped during his reading to show MacGyver

the pictures in his book. These examples all demonstrate kindness, awareness, and empathy for others.

Children and Parent Feedback

The response from both the parents and kids has been overwhelmingly positive. I asked several of the readers why they wanted to read to the dog and if they think the sessions have helped their reading in any way.

One girl responded that she wanted to come because she likes dogs. She is not used to reading out loud, and she felt that reading to the dog is helpful because the dog doesn't "laugh at you and hurt your feelings if you mess up a word." She said she feels more relaxed when reading to the dog and overall, she feels more confident.

When I spoke with this girl's mother, she said that the practice in reading out loud has given her daughter more confidence, and she seems to remember the storyline better.

Another girl responded that she wanted to read to the dog because it sounded "fun and interesting to read to a dog." She said she felt the dog really understood what she read and would even respond by making certain noises or changing positions depending on what happened in the story.

One boy's mother said her son loves to read to animals. He reads to his guinea pig at home, and he has attended a few different libraries that have a reading dog program. She said her son always felt self-conscious reading out loud in front of kids in the classroom, but with a dog, he feels more comfortable. She added that the dog is a nonjudgmental, less intimidating, audience; this has given her son a feeling of pleasure and motivation to read.

Repeatedly, the common themes I heard the kids express were that they felt comfortable reading to the dog and that it was a lot of fun. In addition, they believed reading had become a bit easier for them.

The practice of reading out loud in a setting in which they feel comfortable and can take risks, where they feel they are not being judged or corrected, can surely increase self confidence and carry over to their inschool performance.

The hardest part of setting up a reading dog program may be finding a volunteer with a trained therapy dog, but the two organizations mentioned can be helpful in that process.



Alessandra, Jessica, and MacGyver look cozy in the reading corner at LaGrange Library in Poughkeepsie, New York.



Alessandra reads a Boxcar Children book as Peg Basso looks on and MacGyver snoozes!

I highly recommend that youth service librarians set up a similar program. It costs nothing, and the benefits are far-reaching.

For more information on R.E.A.D., Reading Education Assistance Dogs, visit www.therapyanimals.org/read/about.html or call (801) 272-3439. For more information on Therapy Dogs International, visit www.tdi-dog.org.

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