



Photo: Joanne George

THERAPY DOGS LEND AN EAR

Kids boost their reading skills with the help of a canine friend.

By Paula Kehoe

It's Tuesday evening in the children's section at Clarington Public Library's Bowmanville Branch. Seven-year-old Miquela Antunes is sitting on a blanket on the floor flipping through the colourful pages of *Biscuit*, reading aloud about a mischievous pup embarking on big adventures. Nuzzled next to her is Mica, a small, black Yorkie-poo, her head resting on her front paws, listening quietly, without interrupting. For 20 minutes, the scene is low-key and calm, but there's plenty of petting, stroking and laughing in between turning the pages.

"I like to pet Mica while I read. She lies down and listens to me," says Miquela. "After I read, I get to play with her, make her do tricks and give her treats."

Listening is something that Mica does well. The pooch is a certified therapy dog who visits the library along with her owner, Julie Powers, a few times a month for the Paws to Read literacy program. Presented

in partnership with Therapeutic Paws of Canada, the program matches kids ages six and older with a child certified therapy dog (and handler) in a relaxed and "dog-friendly" atmosphere where they practice reading in fun, one-on-one sessions.

Mom Raquel Antunes says Miquela once



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had little interest in independent reading. A first-grader, "she was busy with extra-curricular activities, like soccer and gymnastics, and wasn't motivated at all to read," says Raquel. While searching for programs at the local library for something that could turn Miquela's reluctance into enthusiasm, Raquel came upon Paws to Read and registered her daughter immediately. "My daughter loves animals and I thought this would be a great incentive to get her engaged with reading."

Raquel was right. Since enrolling in the program, both Miquela's interest in reading and her reading skills have improved significantly. "She's excited to read, and even reads to me and to our dog at home," says Raquel.

Many parents face the challenge of getting their reluctant or struggling bookworm to pick up a book. Fortunately, thanks to these inventive literacy programs and supportive therapy dogs, that challenge is

getting easier. In many libraries and schools across Ontario, therapy dogs are lending their ears, and hundreds of children who need extra help with reading and communication skills couldn't be happier.

The child-dog dynamic

Studies have shown that talking to or petting an animal, particularly dogs, can alter the body's reaction to stress, reducing heart rate, blood pressure and adrenaline-like hormone release. These hormonal changes can help a nervous child feel more relaxed about reading aloud.

Dogs create an environment where kids feel comfortable, explains Michele Peddle, director of team leaders for Therapeutic Paws of Canada. "Therapy dogs are perfect for this task because they are non-judgmental. They boost children's confidence levels and this all proves to strengthen their literacy skills," says Peddle.

Corrections by adults, and ridicule from other kids, can inhibit readers. With a dog, there's no canine correction, no laughing or ridiculing because the child isn't a strong reader. "Without an audience they open up to the dog. They feel no peer pressure at all," says Peddle. And if a child stumbles on a word or sentence, the handler can turn it into a no-fault situation and help them sound it out.

The positive effects of this initiative are seen firsthand at Colborne Public School. Through St. John Ambulance's Paws 4 Stories program, the school has been hosting Sarah Holland's friendly golden retriever, Corduroy, for nearly three years.

This year, Corduroy has been helping a dozen students from the Grade 3 class with their literacy skills. The students see Corduroy each week and choose material from their book buckets to read to him, says

teacher Christine Broomfield. "Corduroy and Sarah make the kids feel very comfortable and offer a safe and comfortable place to read. It's like having a teddy bear in the classroom," she explains. "He's very cuddly and calm, and tends to make the children feel the same."

Broomfield says many children have made significant gains and not just in their willingness to read and their reading levels. "The program has helped build our students' stamina and their confidence," she says.



The presence of one special pooch at Whitchurch-Stouffville Public Library is keeping their Paws 4 Stories program in high demand. Smiley, a 12-year-old golden retriever who was born with dwarfism and without eyes, became an international superstar last year thanks to stories of his work as a therapy dog. Since 2010, Smiley has been part of the St. John Ambulance

Therapy Dog program in York Region where he spends time at the local library and classrooms to sit with children with special needs who have difficulty reading.

Anne Houle, coordinator of Children's Services at the library, says kids who have attended their reading program have conquered many obstacles. "Children have overcome their fears of dogs, and have dealt with fears of reading out loud and making mistakes," says Houle. "Smiley and the other therapy dogs we've had over the years have lessened these fears and made children enjoy reading more."

A ruff job

Before they can help children learn to read, dogs and their owners go through rigorous testing to qualify as child friendly. "The dogs are exposed to noisy, chaotic simulation of children running and playing and loud music playing," says Karen Walker, Branch Manager at St. John Ambulance in Cobourg. "There is also a component which tests if the dog will sit or lay quietly and patiently beside a child who is reading. Dogs must have basic obedience skills, be in good health, and display a sound temperament."

In Ontario, St. John Ambulance has more than 850 therapy dogs and owners in 45 regional units participating in reading assistance programs under various names. Therapeutic Paws of Canada is widely popular with a one-and-a-half-year waiting list to get the program into libraries. Their program is currently offered in 52 Ontario schools.

Other canine reading programs are popping up all over the place, including Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.), Reading Buddy (Cope Service Dogs), Reading Tails (Magical Paws Pet Therapy), and Tell Tails (Therapy Tails Ontario) to name just a few.

All of the programs share similar goals and underlying rationale: to give children a safe and supportive environment to learn a new skill—one that comes without any stress or embarrassment. The upside: children get to read to someone who offers no feedback at all, except, maybe, a slobbery kiss and a wag of the tail.

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Kids Who Benefit Most

Kids who participate in therapy dog reading programs not only make enormous strides in their vocabulary, comprehension, and general fluency as a reader, but also improve self-esteem, confidence and social skills. These programs are especially beneficial for kids who:

- ✎ have hearing impairments and language delays
- ✎ have special language and reading needs
- ✎ have learning disabilities

- ✎ have developmental disabilities
- ✎ are reluctant readers
- ✎ experience English language barriers
- ✎ have self-esteem issues
- ✎ have below grade reading skills
- ✎ love dogs but don't have one at home
- ✎ are in French immersion programs but aren't comfortable reading out loud in English