

Pet pals share in Denver-area kids' reading record

Animal pals lend soft ears to ease fears

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Avalanche, a Lab, soaks up the attention as Julie Wall, 8, reads "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" at the Grand Hyatt Denver on Thursday. The dogs (and one cat) were provided by American Humane Association members. (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

The primary reason 21 Havern School kids read aloud to 15 dogs and a cat named Tony on Thursday morning at the Grand Hyatt in Denver was to unite with readers around the world to break last year's "largest shared learning experience record," which in 2008 was just shy of 700,000 readers.

But a happy side effect of the "Read for the Record" global literacy project was helping students with learning disabilities feel better about their reading.

Reading aloud to a dog or cat seems to take away the peer pressure and nerves that go along with reading to a teacher, parent or peer, said Kathy Klotz, executive director of Intermountain Therapy Animals in Salt Lake City.

"Dogs never judge or criticize. The child knows that if he makes a mistake, the dog won't go tell his friends that the boy is stupid," Klotz said. "If the boy stutters, the dog will never laugh at him."

Just as studies have concluded the act of petting a dog helps open humans to a massive release of hormones connected with health and feelings of well-being, researchers also have found that a dog's mere presence can help strengthen reading comprehension, building confidence in new readers.

On Thursday, Havern's head of school, Cathleen Pasquariello, brought a student who has trouble coping with transitions to the "Read for the Record" event. She was worried about the boy's ability to cope with all the changes in the environment and the program's animals.

To her surprise, the "painfully shy" student approached one of the program dogs, Bailey, and began to play with and pet the animal. After finishing his book, he turned to Bailey's owner, Amy McCullough, program manager of American Human Animal-Assisted Therapy, and struck up a conversation.

"My favorite thing about being a volunteer in the program are moments when you see the impact that your dog had on somebody," McCullough said.

McCullough said Bailey appeared to distract the boy from whatever problems he was having, giving him a chance to think outside himself and relax long enough to practice reading.

Intermountain runs a program called Tales of Joy R.E.A.D, in which dogs and their handlers visit classrooms for 30 minutes each week throughout the school year to stimulate intellectual development in children and create a bond between the student and the animal.

And such programs seem to work. In 2008, learning-disabled students took a nationally distributed Developmental Reading Assessment, once at the beginning and once near the end of their school year. Many students improved their individual scores by 1 1/2 to 2 times their pre-animal therapy score.

In an anonymous teacher survey included in the assessment, one teacher commented that students' reading fluency "improved in accuracy, speed, and expression" after the animal sessions.

"Almost all kids see a phenomenal increase in their reading level, sometimes jumping two, three or even four levels within one school year," Klotz said.

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