



Canine Buddies Help Youth Develop Reading Skills

-UC Davis Study

The Issue

Strong reading skills are among the essential tools necessary to develop a scientifically literate youth population. Development of these skills is facilitated by reading aloud, a practice that many children find difficult and intimidating. In an effort to lessen children's anxieties and encourage the development of improved perceptions and practices regarding reading aloud, programs that match youth with trained canine reading partners have been emerging around the country. However, our understanding of how effective these programs actually are is limited by the fact that they have not been systematically researched.

What has ANR done?

In response to the lack of scientific evidence to support the implementation of canine-assisted reading programs, researchers from UC Davis Veterinary Medicine Extension collaborated with Tony LaRussa's Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF) to implement and evaluate ARF's All Ears Reading program with school-aged youth. Two projects were completed. The first project investigated changes in reading skills in third graders from Dixon Unified School District. In the second study, the subjects were 11 home-schooled youth from the Davis-Sacramento region.

In both studies, youth participants read aloud to All Ears Reading program dogs once a week for 10 weeks under the supervision of UC Davis undergraduate interns who were trained as animal handlers. During each session, the children were encouraged to interact with the dogs and then were asked to read aloud to the dogs for 10-15 minutes. To assess reading skills, a test that measures reading fluency (words per minute) and accuracy (errors per minute) was given to all youth both prior to and following the 10-week program. This assessment was drawn from the Oral Text Reading for Comprehension Test.



The Payoff

Reading to Dogs Has Positive Impacts on Youth

In the study of third-grade students from Dixon, we found that the students who participated in the program improved their reading fluency by 12 percent. By comparison, the third-grade class that acted as the control had no improvements in reading fluency over this period. In the study of home-schooled youth, we found a 30 percent improvement in reading fluency. In this study we were also able to collect information from the children regarding their feelings about reading and about dogs, both prior to and following the program. Coming into the study, this group had very positive associations with being around dogs and negative associations with reading aloud. They reported that reading aloud made them feel “self-conscious, clumsy, and uncomfortable.” Introducing the presence of a dog to the practice of reading aloud created an environment where they expressed positive feelings of “happiness and safety,” and changed their perceptions of reading practice. By the final project interview, the children described reading aloud as “fun” and “cool,” and said that they felt “relaxed and more confident” when reading to a dog.

Clientele Testimonial

Quotes from youth:

“I feel relaxed when I am reading to a dog because I am having fun.”

“I felt like I was reading out loud faster and better.”

Quotes from parents:

“I have noticed that he now reads because he wants to, not because he has to.”

“My daughter reads aloud a lot more than she used to.”

“My son now reads aloud to his little brother. I love that.”

Contact

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