



FINAL PAWS

Taff the Wonder Dog and Dogs Helping Kids

WORDS by Naomi Cudmore and Jennette Baxter

Meet Taff, a gorgeous two-year-old Cavapoo (Cavalier Spaniel cross Poodle) and a star in the making. Taff is training to become a fully-fledged 'Wonder Dog'. In his last test he got 86% (surely an 'A?') and by Christmas he will be just over six months off graduation.

Taff is one of a growing number of dogs signed up by their owners with Dogs Helping Kids (DHK), a remarkable and unusual charity (one of just a handful of its kind in the country) based in Tawstock, near Barnstaple. The varied stars of DHK all have four legs, an orange uniform, an impressive CV and impeccable manners.

Founded by Tracey Berridge in 2002, DHK has one central aim: to harness dog power to help children improve their literacy and social skills. Tracey became interested in learning more about Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) during her studies for a Master Postgraduate Degree in Companion Animal Behaviour Counselling at Southampton University in 2000. During her research she got to know Paul Owens, a similarly positive dog trainer (like Tracey), who runs a Los Angeles organisation called Paws for Peace. Tracey then found out about a number of other similar US charities and set about a postgrad academic research project.

Tracey was the first person in the country to undertake academic research on dogs in the school environment and she discovered that there are tremendous beneficial effects for children from introducing a suitably trained and assessed dog into a school classroom. In 2002 she founded DHK. She says: "The dogs work on a different level to their human counterparts. Their presence seems to disarm and engage the children, and working with the dogs alleviates the pressure some pupils can feel in education, often with amazing results."

Feedback from parents, teachers and library staff is testament to this, their comments painting a picture of increased confidence, reduced anxiety, better attendance and improved reading skills. The word 'happy' appears in almost all of their comments.

But of course, out of the mouths of babes, the most telling tributes come from the children: "This is the best day of the week for me, Teazel makes me happy... When I don't see Teazel I miss her but I am usually brave. She helps take my mind off things." One young girl candidly told her Mum: "Kym is much

better than you or my teachers because she doesn't nag me when I get a word wrong."

DHK's trainees each go on to become 'visiting school dogs', 'attending school dogs' or 'educational school dogs'. (The differences are explained on the DHK website.) Taff will be a visiting school dog. His owner, Jane, says: "Taff is easy going, fun loving, quick to learn and really enjoys meeting people of all ages but especially younger ones. This is why he is now training to be a DHK school dog. He is also a registered PAT dog (find out more at www.petsastherapy.org) and visits North Devon Hospital. Taff is well travelled and loves exploring different places and has seen a lot of England and France."

Dogs who go on to become teachers and facilitators are trained to very special standards and must pass six challenging assessments. So far Taff has passed the first three. His training has involved basic tasks (heel work, recall, wait, stay and the 'watch me') in very distracting environments such as town centres, where he has learnt to cope with noise, changing environments, different surfaces and lots of people. Dogs also have to achieve a five-minute 'out of sight' stay on the High Street, tricks to impress the children (such as 'the snuggle'), how to settle on a blanket (for the classroom), how to focus on the pages of a book, and how to press the 'Easy!' button to let children know they've done well.

Taff's sponsors, Torbridge Vets, are no doubt very proud of him too. They support the work of DHK in a number of practical ways and Taff is their nominated pupil. Veterinary Director of Torbridge Vets, Bill Slee (*pictured, top, with Taff and Tracey*), says: "We were delighted to be able to donate £772 to DHK earlier this year and would like to thank all our clients who helped raise the money. We know that a dog undertaking the intensive levels of training required by DHK will always require substantial amounts of finance and therefore we hope this will help Taff to progress to the next level."

Exmoor Magazine wishes Taff the best of luck for his graduation!

Perhaps you would like to sponsor a DHK dog or find out more. Visit www.dogshelpingkids.co.uk or www.facebook.com/dogshelpingkids. You can write to the charity at Callanish, Eastacombe, Tawstock, Barnstaple, North Devon, EX31 3NX or email dhk@tberridge.fsnet.co.uk.



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