

A new breed of reader

It's true: childhood literacy really is going to the dogs!



Dexter, owned by Amanda Howlets, at Barnstaple Library. Photo by Tracey Berridge

brings tremendous benefits and can reduce animal cruelty by children.

It has taken Tracey two decades to get to where she is today. Her meticulous research and planning, together with a thorough training and assessment schedule, have paid off and her charity is thriving.

There are 20 school dogs in the north Devon area and six affiliates, working in classrooms and libraries across the country. Not that Tracey is content to put up her feet and coast - her ultimate aim, though she admits this may not happen in her lifetime, is to have a dog in every UK school and library!

So what exactly is a school dog? Each DHK dog is trained in four roles.

Classroom canines

These dogs simply relax in the classroom during the pupils' lessons. It doesn't sound very active - but the presence of a dog in the same room has been shown to have a calming effect on children.

"It also improves academic achievement, motivates those children who are often not that attentive, teaches responsibility and encourages children to respect all life," explains Tracey. "Furthermore, it has been shown that when classmates share the affection and care of a 'class' dog, a bond forms among the classmates and strengthens their team ethics."

Reward canines

Time with a school dog - for walking, grooming, playing or training - is a big reward for a child. Not only can it be used for rewarding those who have achieved particularly well in a subject, but it is also a great incentive. For example, the reward has worked very well with truants, reducing absenteeism significantly.

Therapy canines

These work on a one-to-one basis with children who are going through a tough time - due to bullying, abuse, bereavement, or perhaps are even dog-phobic.

The field of animal-assisted therapy is no longer the niche, specialist subject it once was. Now, animals are being used increasingly in prisons, young-offender institutions, care homes, hospitals, and mental-health clinics, and the research about the benefits of dog contact is beyond dispute.

One pioneer in the UK is Tracey Berridge, founder of the charity Dogs Helping Kids.

Tracey originally thought of the concept of Dogs Helping Kids in the early 1990s after being moved by a film called *Skeezee* - the true story of one of America's first 'canine co-therapists', who helped emotionally and disturbed children at a children's psychiatric Hospital in Michigan.

A few years later, this initial seed was further inspired by the work of the Los Angeles positive trainer Paul Owens, who runs Paws for Peace, an organisation that teaches children how to train rescue dogs (instilling skills of non-violence and empathy as a result).

Tracey began researching the subject in depth for her Master's degree in Companion Animal

Behaviour at Southampton University, with a specific interest in why some children are cruel to animals.

Tracey was the first person in the country to undertake academic research on dogs in the school environment and discovered that introducing a dog into a school classroom

Tracey Berridge with Teazel and Wynona at Forches Cross Primary School. Photo courtesy of Jay Williams



Patrons

Behaviour and training doyennes Gwen Bailey and Victoria Stilwell have become the first patrons of Dogs Helping Kids. Founder Tracey Berridge says she is honoured to have such a fantastic endorsement – Gwen as the first ever patron, and now Victoria as the first international patron.

And Gwen and Victoria are as complimentary about Dogs Helping Kids. Gwen says, "I believe there is a gaping hole in education of children in the UK, as subjects such as empathy, compassion and how to solve problems with non-violent means are rarely tackled. The Dogs Helping Kids charity seeks to address this and, by using well-trained dogs that also benefit from the experience, children can be helped to easily learn many life skills that will be invaluable to them as they mature into adults and become parents themselves."

Victoria agrees, saying, "I'm honoured to serve as an international patron for Dogs Helping Kids, a dynamic organisation whose principles align perfectly with her Positively mission to make the world a better place for dogs and their people. The great work being done by DHK is a vital component of the overall effort to help ensure that dogs can achieve their full potential as both educational and therapeutic aids, especially to children."

Listening canines

These dogs listen to children read. "Dogs give unconditional acceptance, as they are non-judgmental, which is especially crucial to struggling, emerging readers," Tracey explains. "In America, the Read Dogs, as they are known, have proved through research that children who read to these dogs show an increase in reading levels, word recognition, a higher desire to read and write, and an increase in intra and interpersonal skills among the children they mix with."

It is the work of the listening dogs that intrigues me most. As a one-time volunteer 'listener' at a primary school myself, I know how important it is for children to be heard to read - and especially where they might not be listened to at home. The importance of regular reading, especially in primary-age pupils, cannot be overstated and schools are often desperate for volunteers to offer their time.

What better audience could there be for a child than a non-judgmental, friendly, wagging dog, who is taught to focus on the book and the pages? And again, all the more wonderful for those who might not have a dog at home.

But the most incredible thing about the listening dogs is that they don't just listen to the children read - they can also read themselves!

Yes, you did read that correctly: the dogs can read!

The 3 Rs: Reading, Rover and Reward!

For Tracey, the experience should be magical.

"We want the children to believe that they are helping the dog to read," she explains. So the dog is trained to look at the book, focus on the pages, tell the child when the session is about to end, be interactive with the child throughout the reading session (the dogs are taught 'the snuggle'), do fun tricks to thank the child



Seeing the dogs read inspires the children and reluctant readers are soon begging to tell a story to their visiting school dog

High standards

Dogs Helping Kids is currently working with MPs to set standards for dogs working in schools across the country.

"We believe that a dog should only be working with a child or teenager, in an educational environment, if it has been trained, assessed and certified to do so," says Tracey, who has devised a rigorous 18-month training programme, with six assessments, for DHK's canine workforce.

After qualifying, every dog is reassessed annually to ensure he or she is still at the required standard.

"This is for the safety of the children, the staff, the school dog owner and the school dog," she says.

at the end of the reading session, and some of the top school dogs learn to read flashcards, which always amazes the children - and teachers!

"I believe that dogs are the most amazing animals and there is so much more we still need to learn about these extraordinary animals - and also so much more we can teach them," Tracey says.

"A dog reading - why not? They are exceptionally intelligent creatures and have a huge capacity to learn. They also make awesome students!"

Tracey explains the process to me. One word is taught at a time and each word is printed in a clear font that fills the A4 page.

Using clicker training, the dog should respond to a cue word before the flashcard word is taught. For example, the word 'down' is taught, and when the dog responds reliably, it is then used with the flashcard, with no other distractions around.

"This allows the dog to

make the association with the flashcard in front of him and what to do," says Tracey.

With a number of repetitions, the dog will learn to go down with only the flashcard cue. Then work can begin on the next word, such as 'beg', 'wag', 'paw', or 'roll over'.

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Of course, it's not just about literacy. In the long run, the scheme teaches children respect for dogs - how to be safe around them, how to treat them kindly, how to treat each other kindly, and also how loving and fun dogs are. If each child grows up to teach their own children these values, effective social change can really be achieved. ■

For more information about Dogs Helping Kids, visit www.dogshelpingkids.co.uk