

# Sit, Stay, Read: Improving Literacy Skills Using Dogs!

*A canine literacy specialist? Learn how a program utilized this unusual resource to promote gains in early literacy skills.*

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& Laura Stinson**

Walk into Laura Stinson's Pre-K classroom and you will see lots of happy faces all excited about reading. While this may not be unusual to observers, what is a bit strange is the help the children have sitting next to them on the reading mat. Laura uses the help of a canine literacy specialist, D.D. McGuffey, and her students' reactions make it clear that reading time is one of their favorite times of all! D.D. also makes no bones about the fact that she loves the children and that listening to them read and spending time with them is the highlight of her week as well.

The decision to add a canine literacy specialist to her classroom was not a snap decision. Always eager to try new things if it will help her students, Laura first learned about the use of literacy dogs while exercising and watching CNN one day. The news clip was about a program called *SitStayRead*, and Laura, who has always loved animals, was intrigued by the idea that introducing an animal into the classroom environment could impact motivation to read. She followed up by doing research online and reading articles. Her research convinced her of the benefits and encouraged her to speak to her principal about trying it in her classroom. With his support, Laura started looking for the appropriate dog. At this time Laura was teaching in a first grade classroom. She interviewed several dogs, put them through extensive trials, and finally settled on one named Mamie. Laura took Mamie once a week to spend the whole day in her first grade classroom for the next two years and felt it was beneficial to her class and their success.

Since this experience was so positive, when Laura transferred to a Pre-K classroom in the same district, she wanted to try and expand this program to her new classroom. Again, with the full support of her administration, she set out to introduce a literacy dog to her 4 year olds. That's when D. D. McGuffey came to work in

Laura's classroom twice a week. The children thrived and test scores rose. But, Laura is quick to point out that this looks easier than it actually is and that she has learned a LOT since she first started using a dog in her classroom.

## The History Behind Canine Assisted Reading Programs

While the idea of using a dog in the classroom at first seems unorthodox, the history of using animals in therapeutic settings is extensive. The first documented use of animals in a therapeutic setting was in a mental institution in England in 1792 (Levinson, 1969). In North America, dogs were first used in therapy in 1919 at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C. (Brodie & Biley, 1999). Most of the emphasis has been on using animals in adult clinical or hospital settings. It was only later that therapy animals were used in these settings with young children.

One of the first persons to investigate the benefits of using dogs to work with young children was child psychologist Boris Levinson in the 1960's and 1970's. Levinson found that his dog, Jingles, facilitated interactions between himself and his child patients, allowing him to establish a rapport with them (Levinson, 1969). Levinson found that the children were more willing to talk about their problems to the dog than to himself. Subsequent research has supported Levinson's findings in several areas, including stress reduction, (Nagengast, et al., 1997), emotional stability, self-esteem (Anderson & Olson, 2006; Zasloff & Hart, 1999), and increased attention (Prothmann, et al., 2006). While the research results were encouraging, they have focused mostly on therapeutic or hospital settings. There has been less emphasis on the benefits of using therapy dogs in academic

settings such as the classroom, which is why Laura's experience is so valuable. Such anecdotal evidence, along with more systematic research has shown mostly positive effects of having the dogs in the classroom (Burton, 1995; Limond, Bradshaw, & Cormack, 1997; Nebbe, 1991). One possible reason for this is the special relationships that often develop between children and dogs. Hart (2000) called the dogs "social lubricants", as they provided a "safe" environment for the children to open up to the teachers about their problems. These findings are promising, but more research needs to be done on the effectiveness of using therapy animals to help students learn new skills. The increase in specialized programs such as *SitStayRead* will help accomplish this goal.

**Special relationships often develop between children and dogs.**

One reason that the use of therapy dogs in the classroom has been growing in popularity in the United States, is due to the launch of the first organized program called *Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.)* by Intermountain Therapy Animals in 1999 (<http://www.therapyanimals.org>). The goal of this program was to provide struggling readers with a non-judgmental, empathic listener as they practiced their reading skills. Other programs have followed all over the country, including "Reading with Rover" in Washington State, "Read to your Breed" in California, and *Sit-StayRead*, etc. While there has been a dearth of research that has empiri-

cally assessed them, the anecdotal data offers support for the benefits of such programs. For example, students who have scored below grade and participated in R.E.A.D. have showed some improvement in their test scores, often improving on reading fluency and task persistence (Bueche, 2003; Newlin, 2003). It has been suggested that programs like R.E.A.D and Reading with Rover work because the dogs provide unconditional social support for the children, such that the children feel comfortable reading aloud to their "friend" (Anderson & Olson, 2006). These positive experiences with the dogs encourage the children to then interact with other children and the teacher (Walters, Esteves, & Stokes, 2008). When you ask Laura about these conclusions, she agrees, stating that the children connect with D.D. in ways that don't often occur when the kids are reading to an adult or each other.

**Laura and D.D.**

D.D. lived in a small home directly across the street from the school. She was already housebroken and required no potty breaks during her time in the classroom. Typically, this sweet basset hound came to Laura's classroom twice a week and on special occasions. She stayed for about 1 1/2 hours each day. D.D.'s owners took responsibility for transporting their dog to the school and for retrieving her from the classroom after she finished working with the children.

D.D. was in Laura's preschool class for three years. Class sizes ranged from 12-15 children. While the main goal for adding D.D. to the classroom was to enhance literacy skills, she interacted in numerous ways during her time in Laura's



Photo courtesy of the authors

classroom. For example, D.D. served to model good behavior to the children, walking quietly down the hallway, posing for a school picture, and listening to others as they read or sang. Additionally, D.D. played on the playground, served as bathroom monitor, and participated in community events such as a Christmas Parade and a fundraising event for the Humane Society. She even helped some children and parents overcome their fear of dogs! Most importantly, D.D. sat on the rug while Laura read to the children and modeled good listening skills. She also "worked" with individual children and with small groups of 1-3 at a time listening to them talk and read.

**Some Things to Consider**

**The decision to add a resource such as D.D. into the classroom should not be made lightly.** Laura gives the following advice to those that might want to consider adding a dog to their own classroom.

1. The first thing you will need is a lot of energy, drive, and commitment. If you are not a committed

animal lover, this is probably not an approach you should try.

2. You also need to have your research and information in place so you have an answer for those that might not be supportive at first. Be prepared that not everyone likes change and some might not embrace this as quickly as you would like. You also need to make sure you have permission and support from your administration to begin the process.
3. Finding the RIGHT dog is key! The dog's temperament is critical. You also need to make sure the animal is current on its shot records. Most organized programs that utilize dogs to aid in literacy instruction recommend using a dog that has gone through a certification process and has (at minimum) passed a Canine Good Citizen's test. Many recommend using a certified therapy dog.
4. Decide in advance how often the dog will visit the classroom, how you will deal with "potty" breaks during his/her time in the classroom, and who will be responsible for transporting the dog to and from the classroom.

Another teacher, Lori Friesen, (2009) writes about how she prepared her classroom for their visit by her dog, Tango:

Before I invited her out of her kennel, as a class we reviewed what we had researched and learned over the past two weeks about how to meet a new dog: stay seated and let the puppy come to you, put your hand out, palm-down to let her sniff you before petting her on her back or side. Ensure that you are gentle and quiet, because the puppy is little and may be afraid, just like us, if she hears sudden,

loud noises. We had removed our shoes in a class decision to prevent accidental injury to one of her tiny paws, and student volunteers had placed fresh water and a blanket on the floor nearby. Finally, the moment the students had been preparing for had come. (p. 105).

**Children feel comfortable reading aloud to their "friend".**

Friesen goes on to discuss how engaged her class became with learning when Tango was present. This eventually led her to conduct preliminary research on how a therapy dog might stimulate student literacy engagement in an elementary classroom. Citing that dogs "offer a multi-sensory learning experience, are highly sociable and responsive to humans, and possess a capacity for limited comprehension of oral

language," she called for further research into integrating dogs into learning environments.

While Laura Stinson did not bring D.D. into her classroom for the sake of research per se, some interesting unofficial data have been discovered. The *Qualls Early Learning Inventory* (QELI) is an observational measure that focuses on six key areas linked to future success in school and is given to all children entering public kindergarten in Arkansas to provide a quick "snapshot" of the child as they enter kindergarten. The inventory assesses developing behaviors, so it can be used to inform classroom instruction. Summaries of student scores can compare different group's results to national, state and district data on the developmental progress of students and in Laura's case the scores tell us that something positive is happening in her classroom.

The results from 2010 and 2011 are illustrated in Chart A and B, showing that the averages of students coming out of Laura's Pre-K classroom that scored "developed" or "proficient" are significantly higher



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*D. D. at work in Laura's classroom.*

Chart A – 2011 QELI Average Scores  
(Percent that scored developed or proficient)

September 2011 QELI Kindergarten Test Score Averages	General knowledge	Written Language	Oral Communication
District average	35%	36%	37%
State average	34%	23%	33%
Laura's	77%	66%	66%

Chart B – 2010 QELI Average Scores  
(Percent that scored developed or proficient)

September 2010 QELI Kindergarten Test Score Averages	General knowledge	Written Language	Oral Communication
District average	48%	46%	44%
State average	34%	23%	33%
Laura's	81%	81%	72%

than both the district and state averages. This suggests that further (more formalized) research is warranted into how canines can be used to support children's reading efforts not only in Laura's classroom, but in other classrooms as well. We plan to work with Laura and others in the future to more systematically study the impact that the dogs are having on literacy.

### Concluding Remarks

There are a lot of positive reasons to consider involving canines in your school's literacy program. Teachers who have already successfully implemented canine literacy programs agree that children who struggle with reading benefit from interacting with a non-judgmental animal. Research shows that children with low self-esteem are more likely to feel comfortable reading to a dog as they tend to forget their limitations

all the while improving their reading skills, but more research needs to be conducted.

For those interested in exploring this further we offer the following tips:

1. Go to the websites of established programs and read about them. Gather information. Try these in the beginning:
  - Sit, Stay, Read at [www.sitstayread.org](http://www.sitstayread.org)
  - Reading with Rover at [www.readingwithrover.org](http://www.readingwithrover.org)
  - R.E.A.D. at [www.therapyanimals.org/R.E.A.D.](http://www.therapyanimals.org/R.E.A.D.)
2. Use information to introduce the concept to administrators, parents, and other faculty/staff members.
3. Get ready to enjoy placing a dog with a student in a one-on-one relationship and allowing the child to read aloud without

pressure. Then document and share your results.

**Last**, please remember that almost all programs recommend using a **registered therapy dog** that has *at a minimum* qualified as a canine good citizen.

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## About the Authors

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**Laura Stinson, M.S.Ed.**, has worked with children in Florida, New York and Arkansas for four decades. Laura used

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## **SECA's 3 C's: Coffee, Conversation and Content Communities and Culture**

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The 2015 SECA Conference will host multiple Coffee, Conversation and Content sessions which have 3 to 4 presenters. Presenters will submit a 5 – 7 slide Power Point presentation which visually demonstrates their presentation. They will also write a one page abstract including a clear and concise summary of the activity and additional references, replication and contact information. Participants will circulate during the session while viewing Power Point presentations, reading abstracts and questioning presenters. Presentations selected for the conference will also be available on the SECA website after the conference.

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