

## INTRODUCING READING EDUCATION ASSISTANCE DOGS®

### (THE "R.E.A.D.® PROGRAM")

*a Program of Intermountain Therapy Animals*

"When children read to dogs, the experience is just magical.  
There's no other way to describe it."

— Dana Tumpowsky  
Community Relations Manager  
Salt Lake City Public Libraries

The mission of the Reading Education Assistance Dogs® (R.E.A.D.®) program, introduced in November of 1999, is to improve the literacy skills of children in a unique approach employing a classic concept: reading to a dog. We know some children read to their own dogs—we have documented evidence in an English painting from Victorian times and on television from CBS's "60 Minutes" more than 20 years ago—but Intermountain Therapy Animals is the first to build a true literacy program, with models for schools, libraries and other settings, around this appealing idea.



The R.E.A.D. program utilizes registered therapy animals, who have been trained and tested for health, safety, skills and temperament. These special animals volunteer with their owners as Pet Partner® teams, offering children

*To date, interest in the R.E.A.D. Program has inspired articles in more than 50 publications around the United States, including Family Circle and Time magazines, as well as library and school journals, The Wall Street Journal, and major TV network broadcasts.*

an irresistible opportunity to improve their reading in a setting which has proven not only effective but fun. And fun is a powerful, motivating force for learning that we grown-ups often overlook!

### **THE CHALLENGE FACING US ALL**

Literacy as a major concern for Americans, their children and our collective future, is not going away. Consider some of these sobering facts:

- The American Library Association estimates that there are 27 million functionally illiterate adults in the United States.
- The "America Reads" program notes that overall reading performance has been more or less unchanged since 1972, and 40 percent of all nine-year-

olds score below the “basic” level on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). Those children who don’t master reading by the third grade risk falling continually further behind.

- There is a continuing gap between white students and African-American and Hispanic students. While 69 percent of African-American and 64 percent of Hispanic students scored below “basic” in 1994, only 31 percent of white fourth graders did.

On top of all this bleak news comes the recent announcement that by 2010, half of today’s teachers will be retired and, because of low pay and other

monumental stresses of the job, the number of people choosing to pursue a teaching career will be woefully inadequate to replace them. Communities must step in to help support the schools in educating our children and making progress in this battle to eliminate illiteracy.

On the upside, here are some things we know about the possibilities:

- The National Research Council, in a landmark 1998 study, says that children who have consistent access to books and reading outside the classroom perform better than those who don’t.
- G. Reid Lyon, speaking at the White House Early Childhood Cognitive Development Summit, said:

*“We have learned that school readiness concepts are best learned when safe environments are provided where the kids feel emotionally secure and where they develop close relationships with other children and caring adults.”*



*The children who have been participating in R.E.A.D. are progressing rapidly in their reading skill, and are demonstrating other valuable improvements including greater confidence and better performance in other subjects.*

- Another recent study says that one of two common threads among children who get A’s in school (vis-a-vis those who get D’s and F’s) is that *they love to read*. (The other, incidentally, is that they eat breakfast!).

## **HOW IT ALL BEGAN**

In the fall of 1999, Sandi Martin, a registered nurse and board member of Intermountain Therapy Animals, contemplated these kinds of facts along with her own love of books and dogs. She speculated to ITA’s director, Kathy Klotz, about whether the benefits that therapy animals have demonstrated in hospitals, schools, detention and care facilities might translate to the reading environment, as well. Klotz remembers the lightbulbs popping with blinding intensity—that, indeed, this was one of those ideas so simple and so profound that it was amazing none of them had seen it before.

### **First the Library**

Martin approached a dubious but adventurous Dana Tumpowsky, Director of Public Relations at Salt Lake City Library, and because of the staff's willingness to think "outside of the box," in November of 1999 the first Reading Education Assistance Dogs walked into the SLC Main Children's Library for "Dog Day Afternoons."

Tumpowsky says that, once she got past her impression of "'What next? Now I've heard everything," her initial enthusiasm was centered on the fact that this program had never been done anywhere before, and the Salt Lake City Library could get a lot of attention for being first. But when she actually saw the children reading to the dogs, the experience was stunning. "I didn't get it at all until then." She realized the program was more than a publicity stunt, it was a truly joyful intervention with powerful potential.

Tumpowsky and the Salt Lake City Libraries have been pivotal to our success, with their gracious and enthusiastic willingness to spread the word about the R.E.A.D. Program and validate its efficacy. We are extremely

grateful for the relationship we have developed with them.

### **Then the School Setting**

In January 2000 we started a pilot program at Bennion Elementary in downtown Salt Lake City. The children who participated were selected by the reading specialist as the ones who were struggling most with not only their reading, but also social skills and difficult circumstances at home.

The pilot study revealed not only rapid increases in reading comprehension and skills (as much as two to four grade levels), but

other intriguing results as well. Compared with their previous performances, the participating children:

- began demonstrating greater confidence and self-esteem in their relations with classmates,
- completed and turned in their homework assignments more frequently,
- were absent and/or tardy much less often,
- demonstrated improved hygiene, and
- developed strong, empathetic relationships with the animal, (Many of the children were not able to have pets at home.)



Teachers, reading specialists and library professionals who have incorporated R.E.A.D. into their primary educational programs have been virtually unanimous in their enthusiasm for the idea that children who struggle with their reading will benefit from the opportunity to tackle their challenges in the presence of an accepting, non-judgmental animal companion.

## HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

Research with therapy animals indicates that children with low self-esteem are often more willing to interact with an animal than another person. They focus better on an activity or discussion when an animal is present, and refer back to the sessions many times in later conversations. Further, during



such interaction they are inclined to *forget about their limitations*. There are also physiological benefits to interacting with animals, including increased relaxation and lower blood pressure. We have seen that children find reading to an animal less intimidating, a special time for them that is helpful and fun and which transforms the formerly dreaded reading experience into a positive environment in which learning is facilitated.

*As they advance to the next level of reading, a "pawtographed" book for that level will be given to the child to keep, as both reward and incentive.*

We begin with age- and competency-appropriate books, most with animal themes. Intermountain Therapy Animals' Pet Partner teams provide a selection of books for the children to read. As they advance to the next level of reading, a "pawtographed" book for that level will be given to the child to keep, as both reward and incentive.

One key to the success of the R.E.A.D. experience is a shift away from the children viewing themselves as the target of yet another remedial program, and toward them seeing themselves as tutors and helpers for the dog. This is liberating and satisfying for the children, and frees them from performance pressure.

## BENEFITS

These are the benefits we anticipated for participants in the R.E.A.D. program, and all are occurring:

- Children improve their reading skills in a unique and fun environment
- The program is extremely flexible and can be implemented in many settings
- The program promotes another way that animals can make a positive difference in children's lives

- The program effortlessly crosses all socioeconomic and cultural lines, since the animals are without bias and judgment.
- The program addresses the “whole person” of the child, thus the benefits overflow into other areas of the child’s life beyond reading and intellectual skills.



*Duke the Siamese demonstrates that cats can qualify as R.E.A.D. “dogs,” too!*

The rest is happy history—ITA now has 51 trained R.E.A.D. teams helping children fall in love with reading in 24 programs in libraries, elementary schools, boys and girls clubs and even youth detention facilities.

R.E.A.D. has been a media sensation, which has prompted inquiries to ITA from teachers, librarians and other therapy groups in more than 40 states and many other countries, including Canada, Israel, Japan and Singapore. Reading to dogs is now popping up in schools and libraries all over the country. The R.E.A.D. Program is definitely an idea whose time has come!

Intermountain Therapy Animals © 1999–2003.

