

Paws to Read



Furry friends a receptive audience as children explore books

The Kingsport Public Library is in need of a few good ... dogs?

For more than three years, the Kingsport Public Library has been offering a program called "Paws to Read," in which elementary school-age children can sit in a private space and read aloud to a certified therapy dog for 20-minute sessions.

Sessions are normally held every Tuesday, and the first and third Thursdays of the month. Children have to be able to read aloud and are typically in grades 1 through 5.

"We have found that after they participate in the program, they'll go home and read to their animals," said Library Director Helen Whittaker.

Studies and research show similar programs improve reading skills and self-confidence among children who participate in the program. A study done by the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, published in August 2011, found that second-graders who read to dogs during the summer experienced a slight gain in their reading ability and improvement in their attitudes toward reading.

As Whittaker explains, children feel relaxed and comfortable around the dogs

since the dogs aren't critical or judgmental about their reading skills.

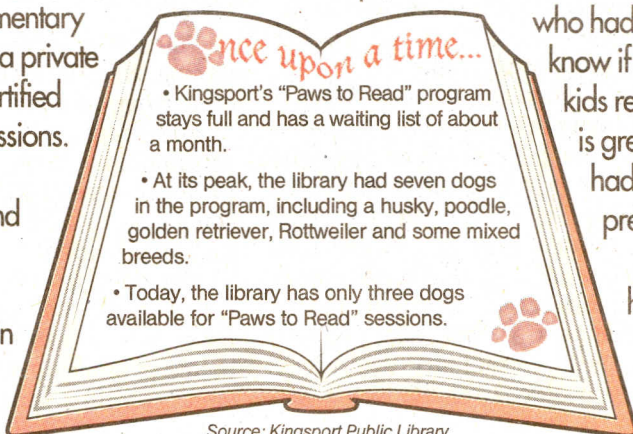
"It was one of those programs that just fell into our laps," Whittaker said. "When we had someone call who had a therapy dog and wanted to know if she could come and have kids read to it, I thought, 'Wow, this is great.' Once word got out, we had four or five dogs come in pretty quickly."

Reading-to-dog programs have cropped up in public libraries all across the country in recent years, while college and university libraries have brought in dogs

during finals to reduce the stress of studying.

Since 1999, Intermountain Therapy Animals has certified thousands of dogs around the world through its READ (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) program. Located in Salt Lake City, Utah, the ITA is a nonprofit organization that encourages children to read through the use of therapy animals.

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Source: Kingsport Public Library

Blakely Gamble, 10, reads to Tyra, a Rottweiler, at the Kingsport Public Library.



Dogs provide receptive audience as children explore books

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Other organizations exist as well to certify dogs for similar reading programs.

"It's just a wonderful program, everyone loves it and it's working," Whittaker said.

At its peak, the library had seven dogs in the "Paws to Read" program — a husky, poodle, golden retriever, Rottweiler and some mixed breeds.

Today, however, the library has only three dogs available for sessions: Marlo, a golden retriever; Tyra, a Rottweiler; and Jesse, a Rottweiler mix. During April, many of the sessions were canceled due to medical and time is-

sues the owners had. However, the library did have a substitute dog earlier this month.

Beginning in June, though, a new owner has stepped up and plans to bring two alternating dogs to reading sessions: Gracie, a boxer; and Charlie, a Shih Tzu and poodle mix.

Whittaker said the library is in need of additional dogs for the program and is asking anyone interested in participating to call the youth services department at the Kingsport Public Library at 229-9489. Dogs will have to be certified as a therapy dog before being allowed to participate in the program, Whittaker said.

Rebecca Hall, the children's librarian at the Kingsport Public Library, said the program stays full with a waiting list of about a month in advance.

"It's a very popular program, and the kids are really excited when they come in to read to the dogs. They just love it," Hall said.

Kingsport officials are planning a renovation and expansion of the library, with construction scheduled to begin in the fall of 2014. Hall said she is hoping the program will have a dedicated space in the new library, noting now the program has to share a room elsewhere in the library, not in the children's department.