

S.H.A.R.E
Reading Dogs Program

TEACHER HANDBOOK

Introduction

SHARE Reading Dogs is a program that aims to motivate and encourage students with reading difficulties. SHARE, which stands for 'Special Human Animal Relationships in Education', involves a dog and its handler working with students who are in need of a little extra help with their reading in class.

The program provides students with the opportunity to read aloud to the 'reading dog' for a set amount of time each week. Reading aloud to a 'non-judgmental' audience such as dog has shown to give students extra confidence and motivation, especially those who struggle with reading.



A bond is encouraged between the child and the dog by having the same child read to the same dog each week. The dog allows children to gain confidence and self esteem by providing his or her attention in an atmosphere free of criticism. Such an environment allows children to feel less self-conscious, as dogs don't worry if a child stutters or mispronounces a word.

Program Outcomes

Similar programs have been implemented in schools in the United States, New Zealand and Europe and have shown to be very effective in improving students' negative associations with reading, increasing motivation levels, improving confidence and self esteem as well as skill levels in reading aloud.

A 2010 study (Smith & Meehan) concluded that a group of children involved in a 10 week program; experienced highly significant improvements in their reading fluency over the course of the study.

'Coming into the study children has very negative associations with reading aloud... Introducing the presence of a dog to the practice of reading aloud created an environment where their positive feelings towards dogs changed their perceptions of reading practice. By the final project interview, students described reading aloud as "fun" and "cool". Overall, the success of this project can be described as creating a positive change in both perception and in skill with respect to reading aloud.'

The potential outcomes for students involved in the SHARE program include, but are not exclusive to;

- Improvements in attitudes and motivation towards reading aloud
- Improvements in attitudes and motivation towards reading and school work in general
- Increased confidence when reading aloud
- Increased self-esteem and confidence in class
- Improvements in reading skill levels

Program Structure

The SHARE Reading Dogs Program is implemented by volunteer handlers and their dogs, who are assigned a regular group of students within a school or classroom. With the assistance of the AWLQ Education Division, the handler and their dog coordinate with the school the time/s and day/s which suit both parties for the visits.

A school may choose to select a group of students within the school, or an individual teacher may choose to select a group of students within their class to participate in the program. The most important element is that the same students are visited by the same dog on a regular schedule at least once a week for the duration of a term.

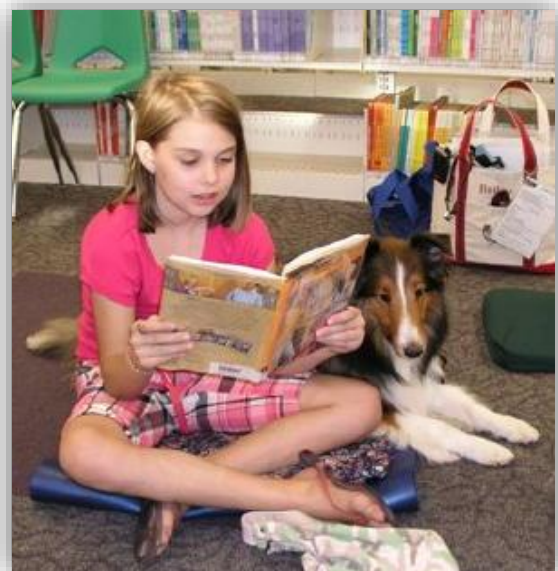
The students in the group should be allocated individual 'one-on-one' reading time with their reading dog. This individual time can be scheduled according to the needs of the teacher; however, it does work well when it is during the children's regular 'reading time'. This means that the reading dog fits into the regular classroom schedule and the children in the group are not pulled out of their normal activities. The individual reading time allocated to each student can be anywhere between 10 - 15 minutes each child, however this will depend on the individual student, their reading level and the time the teacher can allow to the program.

One Reading Dog is assigned to a group of no more than six students on any one day. If a school or teacher has a need for more than six students to be involved, they have the option of asking the existing Volunteer Handler and dog to attend more sessions on another day of the week or, alternatively, another Handler and Reading Dog may be assigned to cover these extra sessions.

The reason for assigning no more than six students to a dog on any given day, is that there is only a certain amount of time that a dog will sit calmly and content before they can become agitated - especially in a highly stimulating environment such as a school. It is important that the dogs in the program continue to always enjoy their 'reading' sessions - if each week they begin to get bored and agitated because they are being kept in one place for too long, then the experience for them will turn into a negative one that they will learn to dread! This result is no good for anyone, least of all the reading children, as they will certainly be the first to sense if their reading dog is not relaxed!

Getting Started

The contact teacher will first need to complete the SCHOOL REGISTRATION FORM and submit it to the AWLQ's Education Director. The Education Director will then go about matching the school/class/group with an appropriate Reading Dog and its Handler. Once a match has been made, an AWLQ representative will organize a time to visit the school or class, along with the chosen Reading Dog and Handler to make introductions and finalize paperwork.



In order for the Reading Dogs Program to be of maximum benefit to the students involved, parents are encouraged to get on board with the process and assist teachers and AWLQ to monitor any positives changes in their children towards learning to read. To this end, AWLQ has provided a copy of a PARENT PERMISSION FORM, which explains the program and the potential benefits. This document is freely available electronically and may be emailed to the teacher upon request to be modified accordingly.

To assist teachers with planning and administration AWLQ has also provided a copy of our RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN for the Reading Dogs Program. This document is also available electronically and can be emailed to the teacher by contacting the AWLQ Education Director (details on last page).

How it Works

Once the paperwork is finalized and the initial 'introductory' visit has been carried out, the Reading Dog and Handler will then visit the class on the agreed day/s and time/s each week for the duration of the term. It is up to the Handler and the classroom teacher they are working with to negotiate details in regards to times, days off etc. [The times and dates allocated at the start of term are by no means set in concrete and the class teacher and handler are free to renegotiate if they feel a change is required. However, it is important that any changes to the schedule set at the start of term, are communicated to the AWLQ Education Director.]

Towards the end of the term, an AWLQ representative will visit the school again to meet with the classroom teacher and assess the success of the program. The class/group is encouraged to organize an end of term 'party' for their Reading Dog and Handler if they so wish. On their last visit, the Handler will provide the students in the class/group each with their own Reading Dogs bookmark, which features a photograph of their Reading Dog from the term (provided by the AWLQ - see bookmark sample in kit).

Setting up a 'Reading Dog Space'

It is important for the teacher to provide a designated space for their Reading Dog and Handler to conduct the reading sessions. This space needs to be somewhere relatively quiet and separate enough from the rest of the class so the dog (and reading child) is not constantly distracted by the general activity of the classroom. Both the dog and the reading child need to be given the time and space to concentrate and to have quality time together without the worry of being interrupted by other children.

Examples of appropriate spaces for Reading Dog time include; a 'reading corner' within the classroom, which is visually partitioned off from the rest of the class. The space should include a mat for the dog to lie on, a cushion for the child to sit on and a chair on which the Handler can sit. A bowl of fresh water for the dog should also be provided. If there is an opportunity to situate the reading corner in another room (such as a breakaway room that is attached to the classroom), this is ideal.



Checklist for setting up a 'Reading Dog Space':

- Mat for dog to sit on
- Bowl of fresh water
- Glass of drinking water for Handler
- Cushion for children to sit on
- Chair for Reading Dog Handler



Involving Non-Participating Children

The SHARE Reading Dogs program is designed for children who have been identified as having reading difficulties, however when the participating children are singled out for the program, it can often make the rest of the students in the class feel left-out. It is important that the entire class, more-over, the entire school, be supportive of the Reading Dogs Program and especially for the classmates of the children involved in the program, for them not to feel excluded.

To this end, here are a few ideas for that the classroom teacher may be able to use so as to include the non-participating children in the program:

- ✓ If the handler is happy to arrive 15 minutes earlier for their session, allow the whole class some time to spend with the reading dog before they settle into the reading corner. This should be done in an orderly fashion, and care should be taken that the children do not all approach the dog at once and crowd it. It is best for the handler to sit with the dog at the front of the class, and have the children come out in two's or three's to greet and pat the dog. Alternatively the teacher could ask the class to sit around in a circle when the dog arrives and they could pat and greet the dog in turn. The teacher should ensure that the children have been taught how to appropriately behave around dogs BEFORE the program begins (please see the section 'Appropriate Behaviour around Dogs').
- ✓ The teacher may like to include an additional two students per session (from the general class) in the program as a 'reward' for good behaviour in class. For example; if there are six students from the class who are part of the program, allow for eight students in total to read per session. The two extra places are taken by different children each time, who are selected by the teacher for their exemplary behaviour that week. These children may have been selected to read as 'guests' because they have shown themselves to be for example, 'extra helpful' to their peers in class, or perhaps they have been kind to someone in the playground. The reward should not always be judged on academic performance, so as to give all the children in the class a fair chance of becoming a 'guest' reader in the program.
- ✓ Towards the end of term, the teacher may like to enlist the help of the entire class to organize a small thank you 'party' for the Reading Dog and Handler. The teacher could allocate different organizational roles for groups of students (i.e. one small group to organize the party food, another small group to organize the decorations, another to design the thank you card etc).
- ✓ The teacher may like to initiate a regular writing exercise based on the children's experiences of having the Reading Dog visit their class. The children might like to write their Reading Dog a letter each week, or perhaps a creative story with the dog as the central character. At the end of

term, the teacher can compile the writings and bind them into a book to give as a parting gift to the Reading Dog Handler.

- ✓ In order to involve the entire school in the program and not just the participating class/es, the teacher may like to organise a time on assembly when the Reading Dog and its Handler can be introduced to the school. The children from the class may like to speak briefly about the program and how it is helping some of the students learn to read. Alternatively, a representative from AWLQ can be invited to speak on assembly and will present the Reading Dog and Handler to the rest of the school, explaining how the program works and what the benefits are.
- ✓ The class can organize a dog food drive for the homeless animals at the AWLQ shelter. They can set up a drop off point at their class and promote to the rest of the school (by designing posters, speaking on assembly etc) that they will be collecting dry and tinned dog food donations throughout the term. At the end of term an AWLQ representative can visit the school assembly to thank the school and the class for their donations.

Data Collection & Program Evaluation

In order to gauge the effect of the Reading Dogs program and to judge whether or not it is of benefit to students, AWLQ will be collecting data about the program. This data will then be compiled and evaluated and used to gain support for the program from potential funding bodies as well as the community and schools. The data may also be used in a professional development capacity when presenting to other animal organizations about the potential benefit of such human/animal programs.

Collecting data about the program is also integral to assessing how the program can be improved in order to better achieve the desired outcomes for students.

In the SHARE Reading Dogs Starter Kit, the classroom teacher will find three different questionnaires;

- 1) Teacher Questionnaire
- 2) Student Questionnaire
- 3) Handler Questionnaire

AWLQ kindly asks that the teacher be responsible for administering three of these four questionnaires (the Handler Questionnaire will be administered directly to the volunteer handler by the AWLQ Education Director). In order to properly evaluate the effects of the program, each of these questionnaires must be administered twice - once at the start of the program (i.e. at the beginning of the term) and once at the end of the program (i.e. at the end of term) to each of the students and teacher involved. The AWLQ Education Director will assist the teacher during this process.



Teaching Appropriate Behaviour around Dogs

It is integral that the classroom teachers spend some time before the introduction of the program teaching their students how to behave appropriately around dogs. It may seem a simple and obvious task, and many adults presume that children 'just know' how to behave around dogs. Unfortunately this is not always the case and not only do many CHILDREN not know how to behave safely around dogs; many ADULTS have no idea either!

Some resources have been provided in this kit which we encourage the classroom teachers use to educate themselves and their students about how to safely approach, pat and play with dogs. Whilst all care is taken by AWLQ to accept only the most calm, obedient and well tempered dogs into the program, there is always a slight risk that an animal will react if provoked. It is therefore the responsibility of the classroom teacher to ensure that he/she takes all necessary steps to ensure that their students act respectfully and appropriately around their reading dog.

Managing Children with a Fear of Dogs

Many adults presume that all children enjoy the company of dogs and will be 'thrilled' to have one visit them in class. This is not always the case. For one reason or another, some children are extremely uncomfortable in the presence of dogs. More often than not, it is simply because the child does not have a dog at home and therefore has not had much experience with dogs. In this circumstance, the child's fear is usually relayed as you slowly building their confidence by spending calm time with the dog. Sometimes though, children may present with a fear of dogs that stems from a traumatic experience involving a dog such as being bitten or frightened by one. This type of phobia is a little trickier to manage and one which may take careful consideration. It may be that a child with a phobia of dogs is simply not suited to being involved in this type of program and the potential benefits for that child should be weighed next to the potential distress it could cause.

It is very important that the classroom teacher make an effort to familiarize her/himself with their students 'feelings' towards dogs. If they are uncertain about any students in particular, they can use the initial visit from the Reading Dog, Handler and AWLQ representative to 'test the waters' and observe the children's reaction to the dog in the classroom. If it seems there are going to be any 'fear' issues with any of the children, the Reading Dog Handler must be made aware of this and he/she will be sure to work slowly with that particular child, ensuring that he/she is not made to feel uncomfortable at any stage in regards to their proximity to the dog.



Frequently Asked Questions

What do I do if I want to keep the same Reading Dog and Handler for the next term?

At the end of term, teachers are invited to request their Reading Dog and Handler for the next term if they so wish. It is recommended that if the relationship with their Reading Dog and Handler has been working well, that they continue with the same dog rather than changing. It is important for teachers and students to keep in mind however, that even if they are keen to continue their relationship with their dog and handler, the volunteer handler may not necessarily be able to commit for another school term. It is up to the volunteer and his or her time commitments.

What do I do if my class's reading dog handler goes on holiday during school term or has to miss some sessions?

Due to the fact that the reading dog handlers work with classes on a volunteer basis, it is inevitable that some sessions may be missed time to time due to the handler's personal commitments. When a volunteer handler first signs on for the program, care is taken to inform them of the nature of the commitment and how it is important that the children in the class are visited on a consistent basis. Therefore, wherever possible, the volunteer handler is strongly encouraged to give plenty of notice to the classroom teacher if they are going to miss any sessions during the school term.

What do I do if I want to continue with the program, but I want to change Reading Dog and Handler?

If the teacher or students feel they may have better success with the program, for whatever reason, with a different dog and handler, then they are welcome to submit a request for a new Reading Dog. If another dog and handler are not immediately available to take the previous pair's place, then the class will go on a waiting list.

Who do I contact to find out more?

If you wish to know more about SHARE Reading Dogs Program, please contact the AWLQ Education Division on the details given below:

AWLQ Education Division
Phone: 5509 9034 or
Email: education@awlqld.com.au
www.awlqld.com.au