

This Time-Honored Way to Calm Kids Soothes Scared Dogs Too

You probably grew up with this, and perhaps did it for your children too. Helps children downshift from an active to a passive state of being. Now they've found it also works for shelter pets that cower in the back corner of their kennels. And it's great for the volunteers too.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Canine behavior experts have discovered that reading aloud to shy, frightened shelter dogs has a calming effect and helps them begin to trust people again
- Several reading programs have been implemented in shelters in the U.S., and most are specifically designed for young volunteer students who want to help homeless pets while also tuning up their reading skills
- One such program, the Shelter Buddies Reading Program sponsored by the Humane Society of Missouri, is showing very encouraging results, both for the dogs at the shelter, and the young people who volunteer to read to them
- Parental involvement is crucial — it sends a message to a child that what he or she is doing is important
- The real magic happens when a child sees a dog he has read to coming out of his shell. The children feel a sense of accomplishment, which prompts them to keep reading and making a difference in the lives of the dogs

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Reading to a child during a quiet afternoon or before bed is a time-honored way for parents to create a calm, restful environment and settle their youngster down. Reading aloud to them seems to have the effect of downshifting kids from an active to a passive state of mind.

Interestingly, many shy, frightened shelter dogs also respond positively when someone reads to them. This discovery has inspired reading programs in several animal shelters in the U.S., and most of the programs are designed for children who want to help homeless pets and hone their reading skills at the same time.

The Shelter Buddies Reading Program

One such effort was undertaken by the Humane Society of Missouri (HSMO), which launched the Shelter Buddies Reading Program. It's a brilliantly simple concept. Kids ages 5 to 15 receive training and then volunteer to sit next to shelter kennels and read to the dogs inside.

Shelter Buddies was actually conceived as a result of an HSMO-sponsored summer camp called "Kids for Critters." For a week during the summer, local students learn how to be responsible pet guardians. They also learn about animal welfare issues and the humane treatment of animals.

Attending critter camp inspired many of the kids to look for more opportunities to help homeless pets, and soon the Shelter Buddies Reading Program was born. According to JoEllyn Klepacki, HSMO's assistant director of education:

“The children get to practice and hone their reading skills, while helping scared shelter dogs come out of their shells. It's the most amazing win-win situation – and watching it unfold has been really something.”¹

Kid Volunteers Learn the Right Way to Interact with Shy Dogs

Interested children first attend a 90-minute training session at the HMSO shelter. During the session, they are walked through the kennel areas where the dogs are housed.

“Next, we take the kids to a classroom area, ask them to close their eyes,” says Klepacki, “and invite them to imagine what it's actually like to be one of the shelter dogs. We ask, what do you hear? What do you see? What do you smell?”²

The youngsters seem to have an innate awareness of what the dogs are likely experiencing in their kennels. They mention being able to hear the barking and whimpering of other dogs, and smelling shelter odors like urine and cleaning chemicals.

“One student actually said he could envision smelling the fear of all the other dogs,” said Klepacki. “This exercise is especially crucial because it helps students to empathize and experience things from the dog's perspective.”³

The kids also watch a presentation that teaches them about canine body language and how dogs look when they're stressed. They also learn how to approach the dogs in a nonaggressive, nonthreatening manner.

The reason the children need to sit outside the kennels instead of inside with the dogs is also explained to them. Since they'll be dealing with traumatized dogs, their presence inside the kennel could terrify an animal, posing a danger to both child and dog.

“Our goal is to give these dogs a choice,” says Klepacki, “in an environment where so many things are beyond their control.”⁴

The children also learn why they need to sit sideways next to the kennels when reading to the dogs. It's because facing a dog, standing over her, or making eye contact can be taken as signs of dominance or aggression by the dog. The kids learn to simply be present with the dogs rather than forcing interaction with them.

Finally, the volunteers are taught to use calm, low “library voices” while reading and making conversation around the dogs. They also learn to look down at the book rather than directly at the dog.

If a dog responds positively to a child, the child is instructed to offer treats through a special tube to praise and reward the dog's interactive behavior.

Program Results Are Very Encouraging

According to Klepacki, the results of the Shelter Buddies program are inspiring:

“We have photo after photo of dogs who were cowering in the back of their kennels — scared, withdrawn, hunched over, tail tucked. As these kids read to them, you can actually see a gradual transformation taking place.

Frightened dogs begin to turn around and face forward. Some stretch out and relax. Many eventually move toward the children. Everything is on the dog’s terms. In so many ways, you can witness the connection being made. You can just see the dogs responding to those kids.”⁵

Shelter Buddies appears to be a smashing success with the young readers as well. Up to 25 kids attend each training session, and volunteers can read for up to two hours per visit. Many children sign up for several sessions each week.

When a child who has graduated from the training arrives at the shelter to read, he or she signs in at the check-in area, receives an official volunteer name badge, and selects a book. The kids also receive a bookmark that lists common canine stress signals. The bookmark reminds them what to look for in choosing a dog to read to.

Along with shy dogs, the youngsters are also encouraged to seek out dogs that seem **anxious or agitated**, since reading can be soothing to them, as well. A child can also choose to read to a dog she’s read to in the past.

An adult family member needs to drive each young volunteer to and from visits to the shelter, and if they choose, they can wait in the lobby while their child reads to a dog. Parental involvement is crucial — it sends a message to a child that what he or she is doing is important.

“As a result,” says Klepacki, “we have kids eagerly showing up multiple times per week, working on their reading skills, even bringing along specific books they think a particular dog might like. Each child who logs 10 combined reading hours earns a Shelter Buddies T-shirt.”⁶

Of course, the real magic happens when a child sees a dog he has read to coming out of his shell. The children feel a sense of accomplishment, which prompts them to keep reading and making a difference in the lives of the dogs.

Sources and References

[The DoDo](#) March 9, 2016

^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6} [Dogster](#), April 10, 2025
