

Dogs & people

Ask a child who's helping him to read and the answer may be... a dog, says **Sally Ashworth**.

Dexter reading with a boy at Barnstaple Library (the paw on the book signals that the session is about to end).

Let me tell you a story

Sitting on a cushion in the corner of his local library, 10-year-old Finn Swanson reads out loud to his companion – a fluffy Shih Tzu X Poodle called Dexter.

It's a sight that might make you do a double take, but one that's becoming increasingly common in schools and libraries up and down the UK.

Finn is one of many children benefiting from the work of charities like Dogs Helping Kids (DHK), which trains dogs to become reading companions in a rigorous programme taking

up to two years to complete.

The dogs learn incredible skills and some of DHK's star pooches are even able to recognise and respond to a range of commands printed on flash cards – a trick that never fails to amaze the watching children!

Finn's mum, Paula, says her son was a very reluctant reader and extremely lacking in confidence before he met Dexter.

"I didn't really expect it to make a difference, but how wrong I was! He came home

after the first time with Dexter and said 'Right Mummy, I'll read to you tonight'.

"I'm not sure how it works; it's like a little bit of magic, but Finn has come on in leaps and bounds. The difference it has made is simply amazing. He said he likes it because the dogs don't tell you that you've done it wrong, they just listen instead of correcting you."

Finn was falling further and further behind at school because he found reading so difficult, but has now caught up, and is reading whole chapters

at bedtime for pleasure.

"I don't know why I like reading to the dogs, but I just do. They are funny and cute and I get to do tricks with them after I've read," he says.

HUGE IMPACT

Naomi Jeffries, the teacher in charge of special educational needs at Finn's school, Swimbridge Primary in Devon, says that reading to Dexter has had a huge impact on his progress.

"It has been a total transformation. Finn is a



Pic © Jay Williams

DHK dogs helping pupils at Forches Cross Primary School.



Finlay reading to Wynona at Forches Cross Primary School.



Team DHK with Teazel.



Teazel with a child at Southmead Primary School.



Wynona working at Forches Cross Primary School.



Teazel with his owner, Gail.

Pic © NOAH



Princess Laya, the first DHK dog. Below: She gets a fuss.



different child," she says. "His approach to reading has changed completely and he's generally more confident and positive about himself as a learner. He went from not wanting to read at all to asking his mum for a Kindle for Christmas."

Dexter has also started paying regular visits to Swimbridge Primary School to read with some of the younger children, and Naomi is delighted with the results.

"They're so enthusiastic and reading is now seen as something really positive rather than a chore. They're also reading with much more expression because they've got used to having an audience."

The DHK reading sessions that Finn takes part in at Barnstaple Library have proved hugely popular and there is now a waiting list for places. Library assistant Rob Lamerton says he has seen children who would do anything to avoid opening a book transformed into keen readers after an hour or two with a DHK dog.

"The sessions really do help them to lose their fear of making a mistake, which in turn allows them to approach reading as something that can be enjoyed, rather than a stressful test of ability," says Rob. "The difference the dogs and handlers make to the children they work with is plain to see and more than a little astonishing."

The sessions last for half an hour and during that time the dog gives his undivided attention to the child who is reading – snuggling up, focusing completely on each

page and even giving the child a signal when the session is about to end.

It sounds simple, but getting a dog to the stage where he can go into a library or school to work with children is the result of many months' hard work.

Tracey Berridge, an expert in canine behaviour and the founder of DHK, devised the training programme, which involves six increasingly difficult assessments over the course of 18 months to two years. She is passionate about bringing children and dogs together and believes the benefits are huge, not only for those who find reading tricky, but for all children, especially if they have emotional or behavioural difficulties.

"Reading with one of our dogs can take the pressure off, so children don't need to worry about making mistakes," says Tracey. "It just gives them so much more confidence and gets them interested in books again. If they were quite insular before, for whatever reason, that often improves very quickly and it's wonderful to watch."

HIGH STANDARD

Every DHK dog is trained to the very highest level and is allowed to work with children only after passing all of the required tests. "We thoroughly test each dog's temperament, and they will already have been trained to a high standard before they start the programme," says Tracey.

Schools are also prepared in the year before the dog starts work there, with special talks for the children on how to read canine body language and look

after a dog responsibly.

To get the dogs to the required standard, Tracey works with them and their owners using modern, positive training techniques learned and developed over two decades as a professional dog trainer.

Some of the dogs even learn to recognise one-word written commands, such as down, sit, beg and spin, and respond to them. Tracey believes DHK is the only charity in the country training dogs to 'read' and says it leaves the children awestruck.

"Dogs are exceptionally intelligent creatures and have a huge capacity to learn," she says. "A dog reading a flash card will inspire and encourage a child to read. They think, well, if a dog can read, so can I!"

DHK's school certified dogs are trained to perform different roles. Some specialise in reading, but others work as therapy dogs with troubled children, as reward dogs for children to play with, groom and walk as a special treat, or as class dogs, whose role is simply to be there.

Research shows that having a dog present in the classroom can have many benefits; among them encouraging a sense of calm, motivating less confident children, boosting self-esteem and even improving academic achievement.

It costs around £5,000 to train and equip one dog, so Tracey spends much of her time fund-raising. She has ambitious plans to see DHK dogs working in schools and libraries all around the UK, and is always pleased to hear from people interested in getting involved.

Tracey is keen to point out that a dog's pedigree or background is not the most important factor in whether he will make the grade. Her own beloved rescue dog, Princess Laya, was the first DHK trainee and came to her at about a year old with a whole range of behaviour problems, including aggression.

"Laya really was a problem dog but with training, kindness and love, her behaviour was turned around and she has become one of the most amazing dogs I have ever known," says Tracey. "She has worked in more than 40 schools and met thousands of children."

Laya is now semi-retired, but still loves to visit schools whenever she is given the chance.

"I really believe that if a dog is brought up properly, with kindness, he has the ability to do what Laya has done.

"DHK wants to show people, particularly children, what dogs are capable of being if they are treated with love and respect." ●

● For more information about DHK's reading dogs and other work go to www.dogshelpingkids.co.uk.

About the author



Sally Ashworth is a freelance writer from the picturesque Pennine village of Heptonstall, near Hebden

Bridge in West Yorkshire. She finds a morning hike through the woods with her Brittany, Doris, a perfect way to get the words flowing.