



# READING GOOD STORIES TO AND ABOUT ANIMALS BUILDS CHARACTER

by bj Altschul

Whether you and your kids like to read together, be read to, or—hey! read to the dog!—the value of a good story lasts long after the moment. Here are two programs that focus on animals in educational settings to help kids learn kindness to animals and even overcome learning challenges.

HUMANE EDUCATION AMBASSADOR READERS (HEAR), SPONSORED BY UNITED ANIMAL NATIONS

<http://uan.org/index.cfm?navId=335>

Animal issues are people issues, says Alexa Mergen, director of education for Sacramento-based UAN. UAN is probably best known for the disaster relief services it provides through its volunteer-driven Emergency Animal Rescue Service (EARS) and its community outreach to help alleviate some of the challenges people face during natural or man-made disasters. But this year UAN is launching a new educational outreach program in the DC Metro area called Humane Education Ambassador Readers (HEAR).

Animal issues are people issues, says Alexa Mergen, volunteer and education coordinator for Sacramento-based UAN. Although UAN is probably best known for its disaster relief services and EARS volunteers—Emergency Animal Rescue Service—community outreach can help alleviate some of the challenges people face during natural or man-made disasters. A new educational outreach program UAN launched earlier this year in the DC Metro area is its HEAR corps.

Volunteers are responsible for connecting with groups of children, whether in schools, libraries, museum settings, or community centers and reading to them from an approved list of books. Guided

discussion uses questions, much as Socrates might have done with his students of long ago, to get the kids thinking about their own thoughts and feelings as they hear what the characters in the stories are up to. At least during this embryonic stage of the HEAR program, live animals aren't yet involved in the presentation. That's so the children can really focus on the content and consider the "how" and "why" questions they don't always get a chance to explore in depth.

"Any time the imagination is engaged, empathy—imagining the situation another being is in—can be developed," Mergen says. "Stories require us to identify with a character and engage our imaginations in that identification process. When concepts such as fairness, loneliness, responsibility, patience, and others are shown in stories, the listener (and reader) are able to move from the feeling of 'Aha! I know how that feels' to 'What does the character do?' to 'What can I do?'"

Mergen interprets this sequence as a call to action in the sense of shifting awareness. "Our core question for the HEAR program is: I am learning about animals. What are animals learning about me?"

Picture books invite listeners to widen their perceptions. I also think just the fact that a reader is taking time for the children sends a message about the value of the experience."

With a traditional didactic learning approach, Mergen explains, there may not be a lot of retention. "So we're creating and holding a space to think about questions they might not otherwise have time or an invitation to think about. For instance, a discussion about Let's Get a Pup! Said Kate might ask 3- to 6-year-olds to probe why the family in the story wants a pup, and why their own families might—or might not—make a similar decision."

The bottom line for Mergen is that people have shared their lives with animals as long as we can remember. It's important to

think about why it's natural to care for them. UAN's mission, she explains, is to bring animals out of crisis into care, while preferring that they not be in crisis in the first place. The HEAR program is designed to grow our understanding of how animals enrich our lives every day.

**READING EDUCATION ASSISTANCE DOGS (READ)  
INTERMOUNTAIN THERAPY ANIMALS**

<http://www.therapyanimals.org/read/about.html>

**NATIONAL CAPITAL THERAPY DOGS, INC.**

<http://www.nctdinc.org/READ/>

**DELTA SOCIETY: THE HUMAN-ANIMAL HEALTH CONNECTION**

<http://deltasociety.org>

Children who don't like to read or who are reading-challenged have a furry support teammate when trained Reading Education Assistance Dogs come to school. Originally developed by Intermountain Therapy Dogs, the READ program brings a personalized, non-judgmental adult handler and dog team to work with a very small number of students throughout a semester. There's something soothing about reading to a well-behaved dog instead of having to face peer pressure or correction from a teacher. For kids who have special needs or don't speak English as their native language, for example, a canine classmate can be the pathway from failure to success in school.

In Montgomery County, Chevy Chase Elementary School and Washington Grove Elementary School (Gaithersburg) have participated in the program for several years. At Washington Grove, volunteer Barbara Murgo and her Irish setter, Ross – short for Rossini, the opera composer – has worked with 4th- and 5th-graders for three years. They also visit NIH as a certified therapy team working in a clinical setting.

At the school, teachers pick out books for each of the four selected children to bring to their individual reading sessions. Murgo says the children show Ross the books for him to pick out which one he wants them to read. He'll sniff, the kids talk

to him and "guide" his choice. The first few minutes are spent meeting and greeting. Then the student reads to Ross for about 20 minutes, concluding with time for petting, brushing him, or looking at his picture album which includes a few more words the child can read.

The teachers are highly enthusiastic, Murgo says, and Ross, at age 10, is excellent for lying down and staying still for a half hour at a stretch. "If I see the child is reading and doesn't understand,

I'll stop and ask him to tell Ross what's going on, what a word means. If they speak softly, I pick up Ross's big ears and say, 'He can't hear you' to get them to speak up so he can understand."

A child who's timid at first usually enjoys reading much more by the end of the semester. The dog's presence makes her relax, even if she resists at first. Mid-way into the session, she may find she's petting the dog at the same time she's reading, and she's more comfortable because Ross doesn't laugh or say anything if she makes a mistake. "That increases their confidence," Murgo adds.

Not just anyone can do this kind of volunteer work. First you have to become certified as a therapy team through the Delta Society, and then complete an Official R.E.A.D.® Workshop offered locally by National Capital Therapy Dogs. This provides assurance about the quality of the teams for everyone involved.

The rewards are most satisfying. Murgo tells of one boy last year who didn't read very well at all. "He read softly and was hard to understand at first. At the end of the semester he began to volunteer to read in class, and he never did this before."

And another little girl who was learning English as a Second Language (ESL) was working so hard, Murgo relates. "She would actually go home during the week and read in English to her mother who didn't speak the language."

But Mom probably picked up a few key words herself in the process. Everyone's a winner!

