

For Teachers and Educators – How you can help...

Children are an important resource: They are the leaders, lawmakers, teachers, and parents of tomorrow. The better the crop of kids we bring up today, the better place the world will be tomorrow. Dogs can play an important part in teaching children values, nurturing, respect, and love, which lead to the development of desirable character traits, and high self-esteem in the child. Children growing up with these values and character traits will not be likely to choose a path of self-destruction, or become blights on society. For the preservation of humanity, it is important for those of us who can to help out in any way we can to help children develop to their full potential.

DSA members around the country have been becoming more active in our educational outreach program. The fact remains that there are lots of kids to reach, and not enough of us to reach all of the schools. This part of the web site is for sharing information with teachers who see the kids every day, and have a greater possibility of having a profound effect on a daily basis.

In a Delta Society survey, children said that they loved their family dog as much as or more than other family members. Another Delta Society study showed that early positive associations with pet dogs helped children to grow up to be more productive adults.

Dogs play an important role for children. Pet dogs teach responsibility and empathy. Dogs are non-judgmental and love children unconditionally. The way adult role models treat dogs will often shape the way children feel towards dogs and living things in general, including fellow humans.

The bottom line is that it is important for kids to have positive early association with dogs. Here are some ways that you can fit dogs into your curriculum.

1. Non-violence education. Teach children how to care for another living being, and how to think about what another being is experiencing (discomfort, loneliness, pain), using companion dogs as a model. Children learn that using a reward-based system of training is more powerful than using punitive methods (this is true in more than just dog training).
2. Bite Prevention. Many kids don't know how to approach a dog. Children make up over 60% of all dog bite victims. The national Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that half of all children under the age of 12 have been bitten by a dog. Children must be taught to respect a dog's space and leave unattended dogs alone.
3. Reading improvement. By having children read to dogs, they improve their reading skills, learn to enjoy reading more, and overcome apprehension about reading out loud. They don't have to be embarrassed about being a poor reader, because dogs make no judgments. Children willingly read to dogs.
4. A better attitude. Teaching the kids about positive reinforcement will hopefully carry over into their every day lives. Children that understand the concept of a

- reward system, will not only do better with dogs, but they will be better parents when they have kids of their own.
5. Overall improvement. Studies have shown that kids respond better when there is a dog present. Dogs can be used to teach everything from math to psychology.

This site will hopefully give you some ideas on how to involve dogs in your teaching curriculum. Some administrators are reluctant to see the value in having dogs at school. If you can fit the dog lesson into your regular daily lessons, it will help convince your principal to allow your dog to accompany you to school. Please note, though, that some of the Therapy Dog Programs that cover you with a million dollar liability policy while doing VOLUNTEER therapy work, may not cover you while you are performing your regular job as classroom teacher. You may want to call on some volunteers with trained and certified service dogs to use in your programs.

When I have approached schools about bringing in a “dog program,” I have been met with answers like, “We’ve already got that covered. One of the fifth grade teachers brings her therapy dog in once per year, and the children get to pet it.”

Just being there isn’t enough! These programs are more than just “petting dogs.” The educational outreach program teaches valuable life lessons to kids, and introduces them to dogs as intelligent beings who deserve love and respect.

Here are some ideas. If you can’t supply the demonstrations yourself, contact a member of Dog Scouts of America to come into your classroom.

1. Positive Reinforcement. Show the kids how dogs learn with positive rewards. Demonstrate tricks with your dog, like “put your toys away” or “choose a book,” and show the children how to use positive training with their own pets at home. Teaching kids how to actually get a dog to do what they want, then reward it with a treat, is one of the best bite prevention lessons you could give! Then, you can play the “training game.” This is like “find the thimble.” When the child gets closer to the behavior you are trying to “train” him or her to accomplish, you communicate this to the “trainee” with a clicker or a special sound, which represents the reward marker, followed by a reward of some kind (M & M’s?). This is exactly how the dogs are trained, and the kids have fun playing this game. See the Shaping section of this web site for more information on shaping by rewarding successive approximations.
2. Reading. Either read to the kids from a short book featuring a dog as one of the characters, or have the kids read to the dog. Afterwards, you may ask the kids if they think that your dog enjoyed the book, or enjoyed being read to. You can discuss how dogs learn words by association, but do not understand English, because it is not their first language. You might ask the kids if they think that your dog would enjoy doing the things that the dog in the book did. You can also

- mention that you learned to train your dog by reading books on dog training, stressing the importance of books and reading.
3. Guest speakers. Invite someone in to share information with the children. Your guest could be a dog trainer, shelter worker, disabled person with a service dog, K-9 police officer, foster puppy raiser, therapy dog pet partner, a dog scout, or a “dog celebrity” (dog who has been on television or in the newspaper). The children always delight in seeing whatever the dog is trained to do, but most importantly, they will have a chance to see that any dog can learn remarkable things, if they receive the right education. The kids are always amazed to see the well-behaved dogs. Chances are, their dog at home is quite rambunctious, and might be just one step away from being carted off to the pound. Children can see that dogs CAN be quite calm and in control of themselves, with just a little positive guidance from their human family.

Tools for your toolbox

Obedience and Tricks:

It helps if your dog can perform several tricks and behaviors. It is important to only take dogs who are safe around children (even though one of the things you will be stressing is to respect a dog’s space). Your dog can take a test to become a certified Therapy Dog, (www.therapydogs.com or www.tdi-dog.org) which will testify to his good behavior and your ability as a handler to control the dog and the situation. The dog must have the ability to immediately come when called, lie down and stay still for long periods of time, and not jump up on kids. A reliable “leave it” is essential.

Kids love to watch any kind of performance from the dogs, but certain tricks can be fit into just about any scenario. One good one is the “wave.” You can change what you say but keep your raised hand as a cue, and use it under many different circumstances. You can say, “Who wants to sit quietly while I read this book, RAISE YOUR HAND...” and cue your dog to raise it’s paw. OR, how many of you want to be like the dog in the book and help your friends? (raise your hand). Getting kids to sit still and be quiet can be challenging. Your dog could be taught to go to his rug or mat and sit down, as a good example for the kids. You could also have the dog bark until you hold up two fingers, requesting quiet, to show the kids how well the dog respects this request. Or, you could hold up two fingers, asking for quiet, and cueing your dog to hold up “two fingers” too, to help you cue the quiet signal to the kids.

Handouts:

Besides a well-trained dog, it’s good to have something to give the children to remember your dog’s visit. This could be a bite prevention coloring and activity book (which you can obtain free of charge from the state farm insurance company www.statefarm.com), or simply a photocopied outline of a picture of your dog in the classroom, which they can color. My dog has her own Business Card, telling what she does as a dog scout, and it displays her photo on the front, like a baseball trading card. This card also has the www.dogscouts.org web site listed, so that the parent can come here to get ideas, and also

to learn how to be better at including the dog as an important family member, through simple, everyday, positive training exercises (like they should be using on their kids). The American Kennel Club also has a “Kids Korner” page, which you are invited to download and print off for your students (www.akc.org). It is a kids’ magazine, with stories, and activities. The activity pages are in PDF format for ease of downloading and printing. It even has a drawing contest that your students can participate in (prizes are dog books, posters and things).

Resource Materials:

If you are new to this kind of animal assisted activity, you can get help from people who have been doing this for quite some time. The Delta Society has put out a work book specifically to help with classroom education involving animal assisted activities. It has a syllabus for each grade level, along with a recommended reading list for each grade level. I got my copy several years ago, and upon recently visiting the site, I could not find this handy notebook listed, but there were several more animal assisted activity resource books for help in the classroom, plus children’s books you can order from the site, from which some of the proceeds will go to support Delta Society (www.deltasociety.org).

Another good resource is The Latham Foundation (www.latham.org). This organization promotes respect for all life through education. They have several good resource books available for classroom education. The organization’s quarterly magazine, “The Latham Letter” also publishes articles and papers citing studies that show the value of using animal assisted activities to teach youngsters valuable life lessons.

Intermountain Therapy Animals has developed a R.E.A.D. program (Reading Education Assistance Dogs), specifically to help children with reading improvement by allowing the kids to read to dogs (www.therapyanimals.org). This group can provide resources, book lists for various grade levels, and other helpful information. A complete packet is available for around \$60.00.

The AKC also has educational kits for the classroom. Their Best Friends classroom packet includes a video and other materials to help you incorporate animal education into the reading, writing and math lessons. This teaching package can be obtained by educators FREE of charge (www.akc.org/love/dip/publiced/best_friends.cfm). For foreign countries, there is a shipping charge.

Bookmark and watch the Dog Scouts of America pages for future developments, as we are working on a children’s activity book, a book for Jr. High level readers, and other downloadable pages that will help you with your classroom education efforts.