

## **More than Books**

### **Sit, Stay, Read!**

Shary Meinert's Yorkshire Terrier, Wrigley, might just become a child's new best friend at tomorrow morning's "Paws for Reading" program. That's because Wrigley, like more than 2,500 other dogs around the country, has been trained to listen, with seemingly unlimited patience, as his new friend reads out loud.

Between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m., Saturday, September 6, Wrigley will be here at the library, along with several other certified therapy dogs, large and small, for 20-minute reading practice sessions. Most children who want to read to a willing pooch just show up between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. If you prefer, you may register a child for one of the sessions by calling the library at 815-233-3000. Say you want to sign up for tomorrow's "Paws for Reading" program.

If you can't make this Saturday's event, another "Paws" program will be coming up on October 4.

### **Wrigley's debut**

Last month was Wrigley's first time at the library. In order to become a certified therapy dog, Wrigley had to be tested and evaluated by a Therapy Dogs International (TDI) evaluator. He had to pass a TDI temperament test, which included evaluating his behavior around children and other dogs.

Since he's just been certified, Shary wasn't sure how Wrigley would take to being a reading companion. I understand he was a really good listener. He even listened politely to a story about a cat!

Wrigley has joined a program that began here about seven years ago. There are about a dozen or so teams of dogs and their handlers who regularly show up to give kids the chance to choose a book and read it aloud to them.

### **Benefits abound**

Of course improving a child's reading skill is the major benefit of the program, but there are more benefits. Reading to a dog adds another element of fun. I understand many children talk about the dogs afterwards and often go home and read to their own dogs or other pet. It is practice that makes perfect, after all.

I am enthusiastic about the aspect of humane education contained in Paws for Reading. While many children just naturally love animals, especially dogs, Paws for Reading gives a child who may not have had the opportunity to be around dogs or who may have had a bad experience with a dog the chance to get over a fear of them. Interacting with a gentle TDI reading companion can provide a child with the soothing benefits we know therapy dogs bring to adults in hospitals and nursing homes

There are benefits for the dogs and handlers too. By helping children become better readers, handlers are helping them to become better students, and in the future, better, more productive citizens. Talk about giving back to the community!

How about the dogs? Nowadays doctors are encouraging parents to read aloud to their infants from birth. I've also witnessed the benefits reading aloud has for dogs, particularly shy or timid dogs. I've seen one dog after another become more and more relaxed as a 20-minute reading session goes on. I recommend it as a good socialization activity for any dog, but particularly as a way to help a fearful dog in your household become more comfortable with people.

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