

Dogs Help Children With Reading



Samaria L. Davis and Cookie, a therapy dog that listens to children read at Patrick Beaver Public Library in Hickory.

By Carolyn Steeves

Davidson and Hickory public libraries have gone to the dogs. Not in a bad way, though: These dogs are helping kids become more confident in their reading abilities.

Both libraries participate in the national Paws to Read program, where children read books aloud to certified therapy dogs at local libraries. The theory is that since dogs can't be judgmental, the children can read and make mistakes without the fear of being laughed at by their peers. In addition to the boost of confidence, the child gets to have one-on-one time with a friendly service dog.

"We advertise the program as being for beginning readers or reluctant readers, but it's popular with all readers," says Meg Sandner, who works in the children's department at the Patrick Beaver Public Library in Hickory. The library began the program in 2006.

"I had one little girl who was an extremely reluctant reader and the mom heard about Paws to Read and thought she would try it," Sandner recalls. "So, she brought her to do Paws to Read, and the little girl loved the dog. She read to the dog a couple of times, and the mom came back to me and said, 'I can't tell you how much this has helped her. She'll read and read and wants to come back and read to the dog.'"

One of the service dogs children read to at the library belongs to Library Director Mary Sizemore. Reading sessions are one-on-one, but the dog handler stays in the room.

Sizemore explains that once the child settles down with a book, the dogs know it's time for them to go to work. As the

child reads, he can pet the dog. The dog calms the child down.

"Each child has a half hour and sometimes they read the whole time and sometimes they read for a bit, then interact with the dog," Sizemore says.

"I think it's great," Sandner says. "The kids love it, even the children who don't sign up to read with the dogs like to visit them. Some kids don't have a dog, so this is their only exposure to dogs."

The Hickory library schedules reading sessions by appointment only. Appointments can be made by calling the library or in person, at the children's desk.

The Davidson Public Library has had a Paws to Read program for about two years. The program began when a volunteer called the library to ask if the staff would be interested in her bringing her licensed therapy dog to the library.

"It's been very successful," says Beverly Swanson, a youth specialist at the Davidson library.

"It's been so great because not only are we having kids come in who want to read to the dogs," Swanson says. "But children who have been frightened of dogs are being exposed to these gentle animals."

Currently, the Davidson library offers the program on Tuesday afternoons from 4 p.m. until 5 p.m. on a first-come, first-serve basis.



Interested in volunteering?

Both libraries are open to expanding their pack of volunteer dogs. Dogs involved in the program must be a therapy dog currently certified through Therapy Dogs, Inc., Therapy Dogs International, or The Delta Society.