

Classroom canines stimulate children's love of literacy

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University of Alberta researcher Lori Friesen's classroom assistants are very attentive, love to listen to children read and can keep their composure in a classroom full of energetic Grade 2 students. However, her assistants are more likely to lick the students' faces than give them a gold star.

Friesen's says her work with her "[literacy dogs](#)," Tango and Sparky, in one city-area classroom yielded some highly positive successes for the [children](#) and her research.

In Friesen's research, children signed up for weekly reading or writing sessions with her and one of the dogs. During that time, they would read student-selected, high-quality children's literature, or work on the student's writing.

Friesen said the small group work seemed to ease some children's trepidation when it came to reading aloud. Using picture cues or clues to provide context in the story, Friesen helped [students](#) learn new words or overcome challenges with other words—lessons, she says, the students grasped and applied to try and help the dogs understand new words as well. She said that the students perceived her dogs as "little buddies," whose presence encouraged the students to read aloud.

However, Friesen, whose findings will be published in an upcoming edition of the journal *Language & Literacy*, is reticent to call her work "animal-assisted therapy," since she says the notion does not accurately

reflect what she and her dogs do when working with the children.

Friesen notes that any classroom activities she and her dogs undertake have to align with curriculum outcomes.

"This is a goal-oriented activity; we're not doing therapy with children," said Friesen. "Animal-assisted literacy learning is about how children experience literacy learning in a safe, supportive, effective, meaningful and exciting learning environment."

Further, quiet opportunities to cuddle with the dogs while working closely with their classmates and with a caring adult seemed to provide a special form of support for these children's classroom literacy learning.

Friesen notes that Grade 2 is a crucial time period for students developing the potential to become lifelong readers, or to turn away from reading. However, the dogs seemed to be an important catalyst in the children's motivation to display and engage in a committed habit of reading.

"One-third of the class began reading to or writing with their own dogs at home, and were choosing to read when otherwise they wouldn't," she explained. "Their parents reported that these children hadn't used to talk about school at home, but now when they got to the dinner table, the parents heard all about Tango's favourite books—it was the first time they actually knew what their children were reading at school."

Friesen said the impact this work had on the children was remarkable. She also noted that the reaction from parents was positive in terms of how motivated children were to read with the dogs. In fact, one child's parents noted that he refused to go on a family vacation because it meant he was going to miss a turn. Many of the parents also noted that if their child was lacking motivation to go to school, if they were reminded that Tango and Sparky were going to be there, they'd be at the door in no

time at all.

"The [classroom](#) teacher, as well as many of the parents, noticed positive changes in the children's reading behaviours and an increase in their confidence," she said. "The children were constantly learning and engaging with text in new ways. This is what literacy should be about for children."

Provided by University of Alberta

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