

Reading to therapy dogs improves literacy attitudes in second-grade students

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Second-grade students who read aloud to dogs in an afterschool program demonstrated improved attitudes about reading, according to researchers at Tufts Institute for Human-Animal Interaction at Tufts University. Credit: Melody Ko for Tufts University

Second-grade students who read aloud to dogs in an afterschool program demonstrated improved attitudes about reading, according to researchers at Tufts Institute for Human-Animal Interaction at Tufts University. Their research appears online in advance of print in the *Early Childhood Education Journal*.

Reading skills are often associated with improved academic performance and positive attitudes about school in children. Researchers wanted to learn if animal-assisted intervention in the form of reading aloud to [dogs](#) in a classroom setting could contribute to improved skills and attitudes.

"Previous studies have evaluated the impact of therapy dogs in children's literacy programs outside of the academic setting, including our previous research evaluating [children reading to dogs in a library program](#)," said the study's corresponding author Deborah Linder, D.V.M., research assistant professor at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University and associate director of Tufts Institute for Human-Animal Interaction. "However, little has been done to assess the effects of this type of reading program in schools, where children may experience greater stress, challenging social situations and fear of negative feedback."

For this pilot study, participating second-grade public school students

were divided into two groups. To be eligible to participate, children had to meet the guidelines for average second grade literacy skills, as measured by Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), a tool used by the school to assess [reading skills](#). For six weeks, one group read to a therapy dog for 30 minutes once a week; a control group followed a standard classroom curriculum. Children's reading skills were assessed biweekly and attitudes about reading were assessed pre- and post-intervention. Proper training and health requirements were put in place to ensure the health and safety of the animals, their handlers and the children involved.

As part of the DIBELS assessment of reading skills, the study participants read passages aloud for one minute while teachers assessed their ability to read and comprehend the passage. Reading attitudes were assessed using the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS), which asks 10 questions about attitudes to recreational reading and 10 about academic reading. Children select pictorial responses that offer expressions ranging from "very upset" to "very happy."

Scores assessing academic reading attitudes increased significantly among the children who read aloud to dogs. Reading skill scores did not change significantly in either group, nor did attitudes about recreational reading outside of school.

It is possible that reading skills did not improve for the control or intervention group because participants had average reading skills; evaluating children reading below grade level may demonstrate a larger impact, suggest the researchers. Other influencing factors that warrant further study include frequency of the read-aloud sessions and duration of the interventions; longer or more frequent programs may show a greater difference between the control and treatment groups.

"One of the most important aspects of facilitating reading skill

development is motivating a child to engage in reading," said the study's senior author Lisa Freeman, D.V.M, Ph.D., professor at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine and director of Tufts Institute for Human-Animal Interaction.

"Our results suggest that reading to dogs in an academic setting has the potential to provide motivation, which will help inform future research into this animal-assisted intervention," Linder added.

Linder has already received a Tufts Collaborates seed grant from Tufts University to research how reading to dogs can lower anxiety and improve reading skills for [children](#) aged 7 to 11 years who are enrolled in a summer reading program and require remedial literacy instruction. The team's objectives include evaluating pre- and post-program anxiety, engagement and reading skills of underperforming readers randomly assigned to read to a therapy dog or read aloud to peers.

More information: Deborah E. Linder et al, Effects of an Animal-Assisted Intervention on Reading Skills and Attitudes in Second Grade Students, *Early Childhood Education Journal* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s10643-017-0862-x](#)

Provided by Tufts University

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