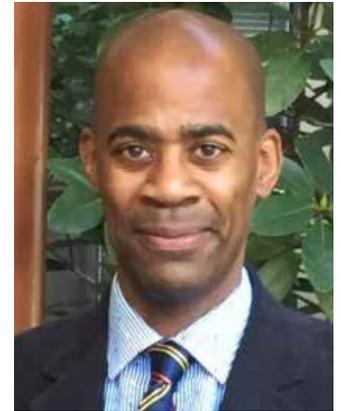


Welcome to Pet Partners' New Read With Me™ Program

By David E. Williams, M.D.
Chief Medical Officer, Pet Partners



As an African American emergency physician, I have spent the last twenty years practicing on the south and west sides of Chicago, in some of the poorest and most violent areas of that city.

I have seen firsthand how functional illiteracy leads to subpar education and limited opportunities. When youth cannot read, they don't graduate high school, they don't get jobs, and they are more attracted to antisocial and criminal behavior, with devastating impact on their communities.

In 2014 the Annie C. Casey Foundation sponsored a study that found that 80% of lower income fourth graders and 66% of all US children were not reading at a proficient level. One major cause was socio-economic disparities.

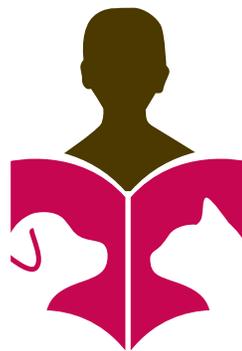
The Casey Foundation voiced great concern that as the gap between the rich and the poor was widening in America, so was the educational achievement gap among our children, especially in minority communities.

Another major cause of low reading proficiency are learning disabilities. The National Center for Learning Disabilities estimated that 15 million children, adolescents and adults in the United States have

learning disabilities, defined by the federal government as children with average intelligence whose academic difficulties are not caused by emotional, social, cultural or primary motor visual or hearing disability.¹

Both organizations concluded that no skill set is more crucial for the success of our children than their ability to read, and additional educational programs that aim to achieve early proficiency in reading are essential to closing these educational achievement gaps. If these trends continue unabated, the United States will not have enough skilled workers for an increasingly competitive global economy by the end of this decade, and our economic competitiveness as a nation and our stability as a society will be threatened.

That is why we at Pet Partners are proud to announce our new Read With Me special initiative. Read With Me was created to provide additional support and education free of charge to registered Pet Partners who want to participate in animal-assisted activity and animal-assisted education reading programs throughout the country.



Pet Partners®
Read With Me™

What are Animal-Assisted Reading Programs?

Therapy dogs have been assisting children in reading for over 30 years in libraries and after-school centers, helping struggling readers and students with learning disabilities achieve greater levels of reading success.² In most programs the therapy animal sits or lies quietly near the child while the child, under the supervision of a teacher or an adult, reads to the animal. While many of the therapy animals that are active in a reading program are dogs, other animals make great reading partners as well. It was important to Pet Partners to support all our diverse species that excel in a literacy setting and that enjoy working with children.

Studies have gone on to measure the reading skills of students assigned to therapy dogs compared to a control group of students who read to a teacher. Other studies look at measuring literacy gains, focus and motivation. I'm certain you are going to enjoy Dr. Nancy Gee's article in this issue. One of the world's leading researchers in animal-assisted therapy on reading and childhood cognitive development, Pet Partners is proud to have Dr. Gee serve on our Human-Animal Bond Advisory Board.

Why have all these studies found therapy dogs to be so effective at helping children read?

One reason is the influence of animals on humans. Research has shown the presence of a relaxed canine companion can reduce stress, lower heart rate, and reduce other observable signs of anxiety.³ In the past few decades research has shown that dogs can ease loneliness, foster trust, improve communication, improve cognitive functioning, reduce the need for medication by providing distraction from pain, and provide motivation for a patient's quick recovery.⁴

Another reason therapy dogs help children read is by decreasing their self-consciousness and increasing their confidence. Children are often hesitant, embarrassed, or shy about their reading abilities. Jalongo and Rench showed in 2004 that the presence of a calm, well-trained dog offers a unique form of social support, stress reduction and enhanced self-

esteem to the adolescent reader. Children felt at ease around the dog who was there just to listen to the story and not to judge how well he or she was reading. More confidence in reading often leads to improved grades, and improved grades mean happy children and parents and ultimately hopefully even adults who will be able to care for themselves and positively contribute to society.

What Does All of This Mean for Pet Partners Teams?

Pet Partners is widely recognized as the Gold Standard in therapy animal visitation programs, with more than 14,000 registered teams making about 3 million visits each year to a range of facilities in all 50 states. To become registered, each handler is evaluated with their companion animal to assess suitability for therapy work, and each animal undergoes a health assessment from their veterinarian. The vast majority of teams involve dogs but 8 additional species of animals are also registered. All registered teams are covered by a comprehensive insurance program to allay any liability fears that an institution may have.

To be able to offer the most comprehensive insurance available, Pet Partners recently made some changes to our policies. In order to be fully covered by Pet Partners GCLI policy, volunteers must represent Pet Partners and may not affiliate with another organization that registers therapy animal teams or charges a fee to participate in their program when Pet Partners has a similar offering.

In my own city, I am excited that Pet Partners is providing additional free support to its registered teams interested in helping to address the problem of childhood and adult illiteracy. These efforts have the potential to not only spread the joy of the human-animal bond, but also play a significant role in providing a more optimistic future for individuals and their communities.

¹ Dunlap, Vickie, Canine Assisted Therapy and Remediating Reading: A Review of the Literature, May 28, 2010

² Friesen 2012 Shannon 2007

³ Jalongo, MR, 2004: Canine Visitors: The Influence of therapy dogs on young children's learning and well-being in classrooms and hospitals. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 32(1), 9-16

⁴ Dunlap, V A review of the Literature, 2010