

Dogs help kids improve their reading skills



Photo by Jen Reeder

Makayla Benson reads to Beepie, a Puli, and volunteer Linda Hall at the library.

By Jen Reeder
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FIRESTONE – Last Wednesday evening, 5-year-old Aislin Ermentraut arrived at the Carbon Valley Regional Library with her mother and sister for a reading program. She headed into the meeting room and began to read aloud to her reading coach Buffy – a Chihuahua.

Ermentraut was taking part in a monthly program offered at the library called Paws to Read. The program's aim is to help kids improve their reading skills by allowing them to read to a nonjudgmental listener. Kids read a short story to the dog and a volunteer for 15 minutes. The new program is popular, so time slots fill up quickly.

"It's open to young readers at any level who can read a book by themselves," said Susie DeSersa, library associate at the Carbon

Valley Regional Library.

The library provides a selection of books, or participants can bring a book from home. Parents are encouraged to stay outside while their child reads.

"That way, it's just a dog and a volunteer who are eager to hear a good story," she said.

"The therapy dogs are a calm and attentive audience for the readers. The dogs absolutely love to be around children and are excited to hear each and every story."

The Paws to Read program came to the library via the Longmont nonprofit Paws for Responsibility, which was founded in 1989 to promote the safety of children around animals. Four years ago, the organization started the Pawsitive Reading Program by hiring volunteers and dogs trained to meet the Delta Society requirements to qualify as a therapy dog. Then they began to visit schools and libraries to help kids increase their self-confidence and reading skills.

Pat Maynard, co-director of Paws for Responsibility, said the children who participate tend to go out of their way to make sure the dogs can see the pictures while they read the story.

"They'll almost read upside down

just so the dog can see the pictures," she said.

If the dog closes its eyes, the child might become worried that the dog isn't listening, so Maynard or other volunteers will reassure them with, "Don't worry – he listens a lot better that way." Other times, they'll say, "Oh, he's really getting excited about your reading."

Volunteers also use the dogs as a way to check reading comprehension. When Maynard is in a session with her Australian terrier Libby, she'll ask questions like, "Libby didn't understand – who do you think was the main character?"

The interaction has positive results, and programs all over the country are using the method to help children improve their skills, she said.

"It seems to really work," Maynard said. "Sometimes it's just peer

pressure or shyness holding them back, or they have a little handicap. But with a dog listening, none of that matters. It gives them the extra practice and confidence so they can become grade level readers."

It is rewarding for Maynard when the same children come back to the program.

"Sometimes

when we see them again, they'll say, 'I tried to read to my dog but he didn't listen as well as Libby,'" she said.

As for the library, DeSersa said they are happy to offer the program, which meets on the second Wednesday of every month. (Reservations are taken two weeks before the meeting, and the slots fill up quickly, she said.)

"It is so much fun to see the children," DeSersa said. "They get so excited about reading stories to the dogs. When they come out of the room, their faces are just shining."

For more information about Paws to Read at the library, call 720-685-5100 or visit www.mylibrary.us. For more information or to contribute to Paws for Responsibility, visit www.paws4responsibility.org.



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Aislin Ermentraut, 5, reads to a Chihuahua named Buffy and volunteer Shelley Fugett at the Carbon Valley Regional Library on Oct. 8.



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