

# Paws for thought

Animal therapy is becoming increasingly popular in the early years. *Ruth Beattie* finds out why

**D**oug settles down on a reading mat. Like most reading volunteers, he is patient and good at listening. Unlike most, he is furry and four-legged. Doug is a dog, and just one of a growing number of animals that are helping children boost their reading skills, confidence and well-being, even to recover from illness and trauma.

For the past six years, Doug the Pug and his owner Cate Archer have been volunteers for the Read2Dogs scheme organised by Pets As Therapy – one of various charities supported by the Kennel Club's Bark & Read Foundation.

Club spokesperson Caroline Kisko explains, 'Some experts believe as many as one in six children struggles to read or write in the UK. Research shows children can be nervous and stressed when reading to others in a group. Overcoming this fear and fostering a love of reading is our aim.'

Today, Doug is in a school, taking part in 15-minute individual sessions. A little girl snuggles up to him, talks about her book and points at the text as she reads. She pauses, Ms Archer asks gently if she could describe the picture on the page to Doug, and she begins to explain, talking animatedly.

'Temperament-assessed therapy dogs are great for helping to create a positive association with books and boosting confidence in reading and speaking out loud,' explains Ms Archer. 'Doug doesn't correct and never interrupts, which enables children to feel that they are being listened to and heard.'

Children can read and practise basic skills, such as page turning, in a safe, non-threatening environment, while cuddling-up with a dog makes

learning more fun and more effective. 'Studies show that time spent with pets can reduce stress, aiding recall and the processing of information with more ease,' adds Ms Archer.

## EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL

Some settings incorporate other elements of the curriculum into the visits – from looking at why dogs pant in science, to maths work about a dog's age – but the biggest benefits, apart from literacy, are to be seen in children's emotional and physical development.

'One child is a borderline school-refuser, so reading to Doug is his incentive to be at school first thing,' explains Ms Archer. 'He feels someone is bothered about seeing him, and not just cross he's late.'

In the case of another child, who is bereaved, Doug enables him to 'grieve and show emotion without having to explain how he feels to yet another intervening adult'.

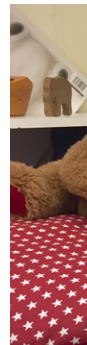
For some children without speech, teaching a dog to sit and stay in Makaton or take hold of a dog's lead, with Ms Archer on the end of a second, provides a rare opportunity to make decisions and take charge. And children with physical difficulties have an incentive to use all their muscle groups as they clamber onto a sofa for storytime or lead Doug proudly to their star charts.

Jackie Brien of Therapy Dogs Nationwide, which works in nearly 100 UK schools, is equally convinced of the benefits of 'reading' dogs. The former teacher trainer explains, 'In the early years it works best with shy children and those who may not



**Above and right: Doug the Pug; and dressing-up horses (children posed by models)**

**Main picture: Chief regularly visits St James CoE Primary School (see Case Study)**



get much opportunity to read aloud at home.

'It is also very effective with children who find it hard to concentrate – a calm dog seems to work like magic. Our current education system is very focused on new attainment, so the dog can offer the opportunity for consolidation.'

Ms Brien also believes the non-interventional nature of the dog's listening is invaluable, prompting one school to change its advice on reading at home. 'Now they suggest parents position themselves where they can't see the book and do something else while the child is reading. This appears to lessen anxiety and help independence,' she explains.

## GUINEA PIGS

While most animal-assisted education is carried out by dogs, other animals involved include rabbits, rats





and chickens, with company Hens for Hire offering 'eggtivity days'. At one Cambridgeshire centre for under-fives with special educational needs, it is guinea pigs that are helping to support the children's all-round personal development.

Guinea pig owner Katie Bristow makes the visits as part of her work for People and Animals UK, an organisation promoting animal-assisted therapies for mutual well-being. 'Stroking can reduce tension and anxiety, help families communicate and give the children an experience of non-judgemental, unconditional love,' she says.

A typical session involves observing and interacting with guinea pigs. Here decision-making, turn-taking and sharing come into play, as families discuss who will hold the animals first, together deciding which guinea pig is approaching them for a stroke.

Stroking offers a starting point for discussions about likes and dislikes, and a way into a discussion about safe touching, as Ms Bristow illustrates: 'Are they enjoying the tickle on their nose more than their tummies? Look how they move away if they don't like something – we must respect that. See how gently we need to touch and hold them.'

Then it's time to get the brushes out and groom the pets, offering a chance to concentrate and introducing the theme of personal care. 'We talk about how we also need to brush our hair and wash,' says Ms Bristow.

A chat about what guinea pigs eat leads into a discussion about healthy eating and, as the little animals snuffle at their lettuce, an introduction to gardening and the excitement of growing lettuce from seed. 'It's always a positive experience for everyone,' adds Ms Bristow.

### HORSING AROUND

Various animals are also being used to address trauma – and aid patients' recovery generally. In America, for example, some courts use dogs to comfort abused children facing the ordeal of testifying, while one hospital uses rats to soothe autistic children. A decrease in trauma symptoms for sexual abuse victims, lower blood pressure and easier recovery from anaesthetics have all been linked with animal work.

Now, after a five-year project in which dogs worked with children at University Hospital Southampton, the Royal College of Nursing is recommending more trained dogs should be allowed in hospitals.

In a field in Northumberland, it is horses – dressed up in tinsel, tutus

### MORE INFORMATION

- Bark and Read, ciara.farrell@thekennelclub.org.uk
- Therapy Dogs Nationwide, enquiries@therapydogsnationwide.org
- Pets As Therapy's Read2Dogs scheme, reception@petsastherapy.org.
- Hens for Hire, claire.peach@live.co.uk
- People and Animals UK, peopleandanimalsuk@gmail.com
- Turnabout Pegasus offers courses in equine play therapy as well as therapy sessions: www.turnaboutpegasus.co.uk

and scarves and nosing curiously in a dressing-up box – that are being used in play therapy. While horse therapies, including hippotherapy (physiotherapy delivered by horses), have been used for some time in the UK, this is the first equine play therapy.

Co-director of Turn About Pegasus, Tracie Faa Thompson, says most of her clients have a history of trauma, from young carers to victims of domestic violence. 'Our therapy is to do with play and laughter,' she explains. 'Play is a child's language – through it they express what they can't say in words.'

She nods over to the scene in the field, where two families are trying dressing-up clothes on themselves and the horses. 'This is part of a session called The World's Most Powerful Horse, which helps with family cohesion, imagination and self-confidence.

'Horses are used to wearing rugs so don't mind. If they shake something off, our therapists ask the clients why they think this is happening and discuss the horse's feelings and the importance of expressing them. Finally, they make up stories about why the horse is so powerful.'

Ms Thompson stresses the importance of a reciprocal, respectful relationship between the horses and families. Later, another session offers a new take on children's favourite, Red Light, Green Light, with two mini Shetland ponies as key players.

'The ponies love playing and the children love it when the ponies don't stop, or nudge them and make them move. It helps with tolerance of frustration, turn-taking and acceptance of rules,' says Ms Thompson. 'From aiding communication to promoting responsibility, nurturing traits and empathy, it can be invaluable.' ■



### CASE STUDY

Natalie Dawber, nurture learning lead mentor at St James Church of England Primary School in St Helens, Merseyside has been involved with pet therapy for the past five years, and is convinced of its success. Here, a dog called Chief is a regular visitor.

'Normally we work with more vulnerable children or low achievers in groups of four or five as part of our nurture programme,

although we offer the opportunity for other children to experience the benefits too,' she explains.

'We start with circle time and introduce ourselves and ask questions. Often the children ask things you wouldn't ask an adult, which gives an insight into their own thoughts. They might say, for example, "Does he have a mum and dad? Who does he live with?" Then we split the group, and children have one-

on-one time with a book. The dog just sits and listens.

'Sometimes the children just talk about the pictures, but amazingly they're not shy and don't talk in a quiet voice. They don't care if they get words wrong and use their imagination – it helps with reading and communication. Often the children talk to the dog, stroke it, cuddle up to – it especially provides a lot of comfort for anyone who has lost a parent.'