



Dr. Diane Gerken's dog Brandy, "reads" with a student at Rosebank Elementary in Chula Vista.

Give a Dog a Book

How reading to therapy dogs boosts literacy and self-confidence in children

BARK Therapy Dogs
www.readingdogs.org

Gerken Family Chiropractic
www.chula-vista-chiropractic.com

Josie Gavieres started the Beach Animals Reading with Kids (BARK) Therapy Dog program in the precious hours left over from her full-time job.

"My son and I raised puppies as guide dogs for the blind. We raised six of them and the last dog didn't complete his training, and I thought he needs to be a therapy dog so we got certified," Gavieres says. "I heard about the reading dogs and thought how about that!"

In less than five years, Long Beach-based BARK has grown to include 155 dogs and the participation of 100 schools and libraries statewide, from Sacramento to Chula Vista.

Gavieres speaks enthusiastically about the latest research from UC Davis and Tufts University showing a dramatic increase in reading skills in children involved in a dog reading program. "The key to our program is that we don't tell kids it's a reading program," says Gavieres.

The kids who participate in BARK are the ones most in need of literacy help. Those chosen to participate in the program see their self-confidence rise.

"Shy kids now have something to talk about. It's not themselves, it's the dogs," Gavieres says.

Along with working to make special needs kids feel comfortable with treatment at her family's chiropractic office, Dr. Diane Gerken's dog, Brandy, reads with kids at Rosebank Elementary school in Chula Vista through the BARK program.

Gerken explains what a typical reading session with Brandy entails.

"When I arrive at the classroom, I spread out a large soft blanket outside the classroom and have Brandy lie down on the blanket. If I know what the child will be reading that day I put the book under her paw. I knock on the door to let the teacher know that I'm there and wait with my dog outside. This causes the least distraction for the class. My student is sent outside and I will say, 'Look, Brandy can't wait to get started today.'"

Gerken says, "When a child has trouble with a word I will say, 'Brandy doesn't know that word, it's a hard one. Maybe we can sound it out.' I think kids feel super comfortable [reading

to dogs] because dogs don't judge. The kids seem to feel very connected to Brandy and although I'm talking they will respond and look at the dog."

Brandy is bathed before each school visit and prior arrangements are made if children are sensitive or allergic. Other than that not much preparation is required. To get started, BARK will arrange evaluations, training and provide all of the supplies.

"We have more requests for dogs than we can fill," says Gavieres. She feels that reading dog programs are really important, and welcomes new volunteers in San Diego.

Reading out loud does provide many benefits such as greater comprehension, increased vocabulary and better intonation, and when kids read to dogs their success and long-term involvement with reading increase.

"Have your kids read to their own pets," suggests Gavieres. "Even a stuffed animal, or a cat, a dog or a fish!"

Better still, find a sweet dog and sign him up for BARK. ♦

Laura Pardo writes from San Diego with warm memories of her loving black lab "Ripley."