



Shelter Buddies Reading Program Implementation Guide

Courtesy of the Humane Society of Missouri



Table of Contents

Prologue	1
Introduction.....	1
The Research	2
 Chapter 1: Program Foundation and Beliefs	3
 Chapter 2: Policies and Procedures	5
Sample Training Session.....	6
 Chapter 3: Starting a Shelter Pet Reading Program.	7
Implementation Guide	7
 Chapter 4: Lessons Learned	9
Procedural	9
Training	10
Registration	11
Funding	11
 Chapter 5: Resources	12
Shelter Buddies Reading Program Nametags.....	12
Volunteer Sign-In Sheet.....	13
Dog Stress Signals Bookmarks	14
Kennel Signage	15
Shelter Buddies Promises.	16
Frequently “Arffed” Questions.....	17
 Chapter 6: Paw-sitive Results.....	18
What Parents are Saying.....	18
Shelter Buddies in the News.	19
 Epilogue	20
 Contact Information	21

Prologue

At the Humane Society of Missouri, our story dates back to 1870. But in early 2016, we added a new chapter that we are eager to share with others all over the world: the Shelter Buddies Reading Program.

The Shelter Buddies Reading Program is a mutually beneficial experience designed to help shy, anxious dogs feel more comfortable around people by having kids read to them. We want to encourage dogs to approach the front of the kennel when visitors and potential adopters are present, instead of cowering in the corner. Dogs who approach the kennel front get adopted more quickly, thus reducing the average length of stay.

For our young volunteers, the Shelter Buddies Reading Program helps foster compassion and empathy, while providing a supportive environment in which to develop their reading skills. In addition, the program allows kids to make a positive impact on the world by helping animals in need.

We encourage you to use this guide to help enhance your own story of improving the lives of our four-legged friends. Thank you for your interest!

Prologue: The Research

Research has shown that reading to dogs has a positive impact on both the animals and the children who interact with them. Here are some statistics to consider:

- Children who read aloud to dogs for 10 to 15 minutes per week experienced a 12% increase in reading proficiency. (University of California Davis study)

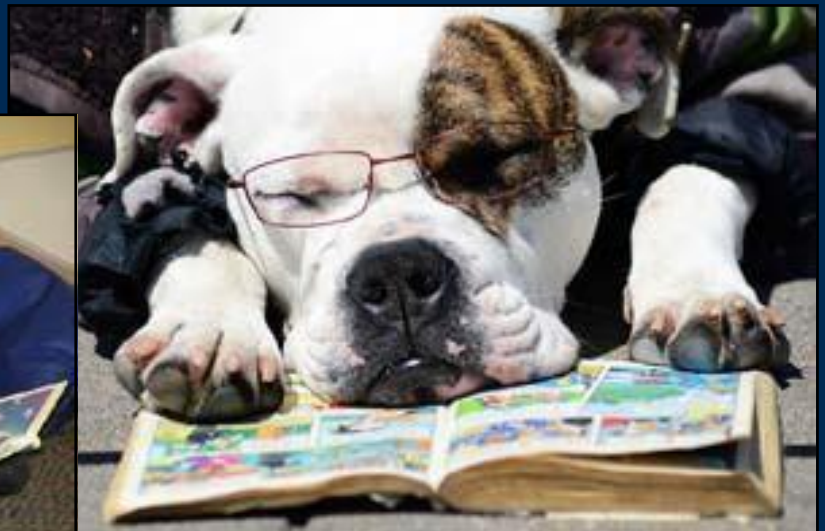
- In a study, children reported feeling “self-conscious, nervous, clumsy and uncomfortable” when reading out loud, but when they read in the presence of a dog, the same children reported feelings of “happiness and safety.” (University of California Davis study)

- Research estimates that over 70% of children of all ages talk to, and confide in, animals. (TherapyAnimals.org)

Students who took part in the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) program for 13 months increased their reading proficiency by at least two grade levels. (TherapyAnimals.org)

- Children who have difficulty relating to other people have been observed to show greater self-confidence around pets, which helps them transfer that behavior to humans. (WebMD)

- Being read to helps fearful or shy dogs become more comfortable with people because there is no forced interaction. (ASPCA.org)



Chapter 1:

Program Foundation and Beliefs

At the Humane Society of Missouri, we believe children have the ability to make a positive impact on the lives of animals. We also believe that with proper training and guidance, they can improve the quality of lives for shelter animals. Thus, we created the Shelter Buddies Reading Program to provide an opportunity for animals and kids to engage in a meaningful way. We established the program with three main goals in mind:



1. Encourage empathy and compassion in children

The Shelter Buddies Reading Program is intended for children from the ages of 6-15. Prior to reading to the dogs, our young readers and at least one parent attend a two-hour training session in which they learn how to identify and respond to the animals' body language and empathize with their situation. We help children learn to view the world from the pups' perspectives so as to help them better connect.



2. Help comfort shy, fearful dogs and ease their anxiety

Dogs thrive on choices, a feature they do not often experience in a shelter environment. The Shelter Buddies Reading Program is a calm, peaceful activity that provides the animals with a choice of whether they want to keep to themselves or engage with the young reader. This non-physical interaction is less intimidating for the animals, and helps children practice their reading skills.



3. Get shelter dogs adopted more quickly

The ultimate goal of the program is for our dogs to feel comfortable engaging with visitors so that they experience a shorter length of stay in the shelter before being adopted. Through their positive interactions with the readers, dogs become more willing to approach the front of the kennel to greet potential adopters. Quicker adoption is also better for their well-being and provides more room for additional dogs in holding areas to move to the adoption floor.

Chapter 2: Policies and Procedures

In order to ensure a mutually beneficial experience for dogs and children, we created a set of program policies and procedures. By participating in the Shelter Buddies Reading Program, young readers agree to...



1. Keep the dogs comfortable by being quiet, calm and responsive to their needs and wishes.
2. Attend a training session prior to participating and be accompanied by a parent during training and reading.
3. Wear closed-toed, rubber-sole shoes, as well as their nametag at all times.
4. Document their hours by signing in and out.
5. Take turns reading to the dogs - only five children may read at a time in each wing.
6. Provide dogs with positive reinforcement in the form of approved treats and praise.
7. Only interact with the dogs verbally or through body language. Avoid all physical contact.
8. Learn to properly read and respond to the animals' body language.
9. Read only during shelter-approved reading times.
10. Report any injury that may occur immediately to the Education Staff or Shelter Supervisor.
11. Identify dogs who appear to be shy or fearful and work to reduce the stress signals they are exhibiting.
12. Find another dog to read to in the event a potential adopter is interested in the one currently being read to.
13. Have fun making a positive difference in the lives of shelter animals.
14. Teach friends and family what they have learned.

Sample Training Session

10:00 – 10:20am

Arrival Activities

- Sign in, receive nametag, sign waiver
- Have children walk through kennel

10:20 - 10:30am

In Their Paws: Empathy-Building Visualization Exercise

- Ask children to imagine they are one of the dogs they just saw
 - What do they hear, smell, see, feel?
 - Have them explain how or why these dogs arrived at the shelter
 - Ask children how they imagine dogs feel after arriving

10:30 – 10:45am

Canine Communication

- Explain how animals use their body language to communicate what they are thinking, feeling and wishing
- Show dog body language examples

10:45 – 11:00am

Review Reading Rules

- Demonstrate how to approach kennel
- Discuss ways to make dogs comfortable
 - a. Calm, peaceful voices
 - b. No running or quick movements
 - c. Approaching them from the side
 - d. Tossing approved kibble or treats into the kennel

11:00 – 11:45am

Tour and Reading

- Divide children into smaller groups
- Rotate groups between touring the shelter and reading to the dogs

11:45am – 12:00pm

Conclusion and Reflection

- Find out what the kids enjoyed most
- Discuss how they felt before and after
- Reinforce the positive impact they made on the dogs
- Thank them for their service and encourage them to come back soon

Chapter 3:

Starting a Shelter Pet Reading Program

Implementation Guide

1. Get your team on board

Schedule a meeting with your shelter team and get them excited about the idea. This program will affect them the most, so their support and enthusiasm is crucial to its success. Ask them for their advice, ideas, suggestions and concerns, and let them choose which reading hours will work best. As a group, decide the maximum number of children who can read at a time. Too many readers, in addition to adopters and staff, can be overwhelming for the animals.

2. Gain necessary approval

Decide upon the cost of the program, as well as the frequency of trainings and the maximum number of spots in each training class.

3. Secure a strong volunteer base

Recruit current and new volunteers to help train readers. Make sure to have enough volunteers to help facilitate the trainings in case of high demand.

4. Decide on the registration process

If your shelter already has an online registration system built into your website, we suggest you use it for this program. It is the easiest and most efficient method. You can also take registrations via email or phone.

5. Acquire materials

Purchase, prepare, and create any items needed for the program - books, roster, visual aids, nametags, PowerPoint presentations, liability/safety waivers for readers and volunteers, etc.



GOAL
VISION PLANNING SOLUTION SUCCESS
STRATEGY ANALYSIS PROCESS



Implementation Guide “Continued”

6. Advertise the program

Promote the program using a variety of avenues - social media, your shelter newsletter, emails to donors, signage in the shelter, etc.

7. Host the trainings

With your trained volunteers, begin teaching the children how to interact with the animals and read their body language.

8. Seek feedback from families

Create a survey ([SurveyMonkey](#) is a free resource) and distribute it to families who participated in the program. Find out what they liked or did not like and what they thought went well.

9. Seek feedback from shelter staff

Find out what your staff thinks of the program, and if they have any ideas to improve the experience for children, the parents, or the animals.

10. Routinely evaluate the program

Objectively review the program and think of ways to improve it, increase its efficiency, and create an overall positive experience for each partner



Chapter 4: Lessons Learned

Procedural



1. Limit the number of children you have reading at one time as too many can be stressful for the animals. Have children and parents monitor their time in order to allow everyone a chance to read.

2. Roll the program out slowly and limit the amount of children in each training session. You can start with 15 children in each session, then modify from there depending on the demand.

3. We recommend having parents sign a waiver to have their child participate.

4. We require children to register for a planned training session, but after that, they do not need to sign up in advance to read. We want the reading hours to be flexible.

5. While reading, have children sit on the floor sideways to the kennel. This decreases their stature and makes them less intimidating to the shy, fearful dogs.

6. Create program-specific nametags and have the children leave them at the shelter in order to lessen the chance of them being lost. We also provide generic nametags for parents.

7. Consider offering children rewards for reading. We offer a special “Shelter Buddies” t-shirt for each child once they read for 10 hours. They also earn a sticker for their nametag for every 10 hours they read. While we do provide small material rewards, our hope is that the students are intrinsically motivated to participate in the program.



Training

1. Require parents to attend the training session with their child(ren) and have them stay in the shelter while the child reads. This works best if you provide ample seating just outside the animal wings so they can see their children and offer assistance if needed.

2. For the training session, allow at least 90 minutes. Include time to read to the dogs as well as a tour of the shelter to help the children and their parents feel comfortable. While they are reading for the first time, walk around and provide encouragement and positive feedback when they follow the procedures.

3. Ask families to arrive 15 minutes early for the training so they have time to walk through a dog wing and get a frame of reference for the sights, smells, sounds and feelings of the animals. We found that more than half of our new Shelter Buddies had never been to a shelter before.

4. We schedule at least three volunteer humane educators to teach a training in order to cover for unexpected situations or emergencies. We also involve our teen volunteers, many of whom serve as our summer camp counselors.



5. Consider offering training sessions geared toward specific age groups. It is challenging to make a training program developmentally appropriate for such a wide age range. If you have space in your shelter, divide the group and have an educator lead a training session for older children in a separate room.

6. Recruit a librarian or educator to join your volunteer team. One reached out to us early in our program and she has been a tremendous help. She reads and evaluates each book for our library, sorts the books into categories and greets our guests every week.

7. We choose to only offer animal-themed books (fiction and nonfiction) in our library. In addition, the books we select promote the humane messages we seek to spread.

Registration

1. In order to save time, we suggest you use an online registration process.
2. Consider charging a nominal fee to help cover the cost of your supplies. We charge \$5 per child which resulted in us generating more than \$3,000 for the program in its first nine months.
3. Include a “What to Expect” section on your webpage so parents can prepare their children for the program. There will be lots of barking and animals in various physical conditions, classroom learning and many other activities and objectives.
4. Hold parents and children accountable for training dates. We do not provide refunds for no-shows and require them to re-register for a different training date. If they notify us prior to the date, we do allow them to reschedule.



Funding

1. Enlist support from a wide variety of resources. Generous authors and publishers donated their books to us, our volunteers gave their time to teach the training sessions, donors offered up bookcases and baskets for sorting our books, compassionate children raised funds to support the program and we also received a wonderful donation from Rachael Ray.
2. Do not let a lack of books deter you from launching a reading program. Instead, encourage children to bring their own books - either their favorites or ones they think the dogs would want to hear. Then, reach out to your donors, supporters and members and ask them to donate any children's books.



Chapter 5: Resources

Shelter Buddies Reading Program Nametags



Brody

Shelter Buddy Reader



Emma

Shelter Buddy Reader



Joshua

Shelter Buddy Reader



Josie

Shelter Buddy Reader



Lillyian

Shelter Buddy Reader



Mary

Shelter Buddy Reader



Peter

Shelter Buddy Reader



Sloane

Shelter Buddy Reader

Shelter Buddies Reading Program Volunteer Sign-In Sheet

[illegible]

Dog Stress Signals Bookmarks

As part of the Shelter Buddies Reading Program, we educate children and parents on the range of canine behaviors and how to identify them. In addition to teaching the information, we provide each reader with one of these bookmarks to remind them of the dogs' stress signals, as well as encourage a lifelong love of reading.

If you are interested in purchasing these bookmarks for your organization, order them online at [Living With Kids and Dogs](http://LivingWithKidsandDogs.com).



Kennel Signage

Our shelter staff, adoption counselors and dog walker volunteers use these signs to identify dogs they feel would benefit most from the reading program. The signs encourage children to interact with these pups, especially the ones who are too shy to “bark” for themselves.



Me, Me, Me!!

Please read to me next!!

I will always
sit sideways
to the dog.

I will
never put
my fingers
in the cage.

I will always
stay quiet
and calm.

I will give
treats from
that dog's
bowl only.

Shelter Buddies Promises

Frequently “Arffed” Questions

Can any child show up to read to the dogs?

At the Humane Society of Missouri, we allow any child from the ages of 6-15 to take part in the Shelter Buddies Reading Program. In order to control the number of readers, we require participants to register online, which includes a one-time registration fee of \$5 per child. Readers and at least one parent must then attend one of our training sessions. Once they’ve done that, children are free to read to the dogs any day during reading hours under parental or guardian supervision.

What information is taught during the training session?

The first thing we do with the children is an exercise in empathy, which allows them to see things from the dogs’ point of view. We also teach them how to read and interpret canine body language in addition to behavior that dogs might find intimidating, and thus should be avoided. Then, we discuss policies and procedures and finish the training session by giving them a tour of the facilities. This is to help them feel comfortable at the shelter and understand the services and programs we provide.

Are books provided or should children bring their own?

We encourage kids to bring their favorite books to share with the animals. However, we have a library filled with dozens of animal-themed books that children can choose to read from as well.

What do children think of the program?

We have received glowing reviews of the Shelter Buddies Reading Program from our young readers and their parents. The children enjoy being able to see the difference they are making in the lives of the dogs and it provides the positive reinforcement they seek in order to feel valued. The program is a way for children to “put their compassion into ACTION,” as we like to say. At the same time, kids are able to practice and improve their reading skills in front of a non-judgmental, supportive audience.

Chapter 6:

Paw-sitive Results

What Parents are Saying

“My 7-year old has dyslexia and is struggling to learn to read. She loves animals of all kinds, but especially dogs. I thought the Shelter Buddies Volunteer program would give her a safe place to practice without having to worry about missing things.”

“Reading to the dogs and playing with the rats was the thing she liked the most, but she uses the information [from] the [dog stress signals bookmarks] daily now in her interaction with dogs in the neighborhood.”

“[My daughter] feels like she is making a difference at 7 years old. She calls the dogs her ‘buddies.’ About once a week we have to ‘go read to her buddies.’”

“[I enjoyed] seeing the love in both my child’s eyes and the [eyes of the] dogs he reads to.”

“After the first time she read to the dogs, she said, ‘You know, it’s almost like I have a job now.’”



Shelter Buddies in the News

We created the Shelter Buddies Reading Program as a way to provide a unique experience for children and dogs, while working to improve our community. It was not long until people all over the world began taking note of our efforts:

Articles



Time: [Watch These Kids Comfort Shelter Dogs by Reading to Them](#)

By: Megan McCluskey



Mashable: [Kids reading to shelter dogs is a program designed to help shy pups](#)

By: Brian Koerber



ABC News: [Kids Practice Reading to Shy Shelter Dogs at Missouri Humane Society](#)

By: Catherine Thorbecke



St. Louis Post Dispatch: [This St. Louis reading program is going to the dogs](#)

By: Denise Hollinshed



The Dodo: [Something Really Amazing Is Happening At This Animal Shelter](#)

By: Stephen Messenger

Videos



NBC News: [Children Help Get Shelter Dogs' Tails Wagging By Reading to Them](#)



Rachael Ray: [A Twofold Program That Encourages Children to Read, and Helps Shelter Pups Get Adopted](#)

Epilogue

According to multiple studies, length of stay is the most significant risk factor for illness in shelter animals and increases the chance they acquire health problems such as canine or feline upper respiratory disease (Dinnage et al 2009 & Edinboro et al 2004).

Our goal in creating the Shelter Buddies Reading Program was to combat this issue and reduce the length of stay for our shelter dogs. We are proud to say that we have been successful on that front, and in a number of other ways as well.

On any given day, we witness shy, anxious dogs work up the courage to approach their kennel-front to meet and connect with Shelter Buddy readers. By developing this behavior, the dogs are making themselves more appealing to potential adopters, which ultimately will lead to a reduction of their length of stay.

In addition, the Shelter Buddies Reading Program has lessened our need for animal-calming products such as Adaptil D.A.P. Collars and ThunderShirts. We often use these stress-relieving products to ease dogs' anxiety and help them feel more at ease. Since implementing the reading program, we have been able to decrease the amount of time our dogs need that type of support.

We are excited to continue building and developing this great program, but even more excited to see what your shelter, and animal shelters all over the world, can achieve.

Contact Information

We are thrilled you are interested in finding out more about the Shelter Buddies Reading Program. If you have additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact us:

**JoEllyn Klepacki
Director of Education
Humane Society of MO
1201 Macklind Ave.
St. Louis, MO 63110**

**314-951-1572
jklepacki@hsmo.org
www.hsmo.org/shelterbuddies**