Paws for thought

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

Doug 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 struggles 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 Maktaton 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 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.