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Meet The Therapy Dogs Helping Kids In Broward Read With More Confidence

By CAITIE SWITALSKI (/PEOPLE/CAITIE-SWITALSKI) • JUL 29, 2018

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Logan Mcguire, 6, read to therapy dogs Zoe and Sydney on Saturday July 28.

It's a typical Saturday afternoon at North Regional Broward College Library. Logan McGuire, 6, picks a book and sits down to read. He has an audience waiting - his new friend Zoe.

As Logan reads out loud page by page of "The Cookie Fiasco," by Dan Santat and Mo Willems, Zoe looks curious. She gets closer and, at one point licks Logan's hand. It's a gesture of affection in dogs and she happens to be a Shih Tzu. But Logan, unfazed, keeps on reading until he finishes the entire book.



Gaining confidence reading in the classroom can be intimidating for some children. That's why the Humane Society of Broward County started bringing therapy dogs to libraries, as part of a reading program called Wags & Tales (<https://humanebroward.com/programs/teachers/wags-n-tales/>).

Zoe is one of the therapy dogs, whose owner, Lolita Bueno, volunteers with Wags & Tales once a month in Coconut Creek. Bueno sits with Zoe and kids like Logan, while they have one-on-one reading time with the dog.

"As soon as they walk into the room, they're in awe that there's a dog there that they're going to be reading to," Bueno said. "That's why this program is so beautiful, because a dog is not going to make fun of kids if they're not reading right, and there's no judgment there."

That's exactly why Marni Bellavia started the Wags&Tales program back in 2002. She also directs the Animal Assisted Therapy programs at the Humane Society, which includes the new Canines for Community Resilience Program that was created to give therapy dogs specialized crisis training after the Parkland school shooting in February.



(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wlrn/files/styles/x_large/public/201807/IMG_2986.jpg).

Kids coming to Wags&Tales get individual reading time with therapy dogs like Sydney, left, and Zoe, right, from the Humane Society of Broward County.

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Bellavia said, therapy dogs help struggling students in any grade practice reading with comfort, instead of fear.

"You take all of the pressure off the child - you're no longer the adult that's helping them - it's the dog that's really helping them perform better and become a better reader," she said.

Read More: What's Going On In Your Child's Brain When You Read Them A Story?
(<http://www.wlrn.org/post/whats-going-your-childs-brain-when-you-read-them-story>)

The Humane Society partners with Broward County public schools and libraries, so the Wags & Tales program travels countywide.

"There are different reasons why either children or young adults don't want to read, or they don't want to read out loud," Bellavia said. "It could be vision-related, it could be speech-related. It could be peer-related...in schools there is a lot of bullying, unfortunately."

Logan's mom, Mary Mcguire, wanted to give her son strong reading confidence as soon as he started to learn.

"He was reading some, but I knew that maybe something like this program would get him really going with his reading," she said. "He really has progressed so well, and he's so comfortable with the animals."

Bellavia said it's because of that comfort level dogs bring to nerve-wracking situations that Wags & Tales works. It doesn't have age limits so that kids in all grades and reading levels can come and practice with the animals.

"They're not concerned with what you're wearing or what grade you're in," she said. "They are literally just there to be listeners and provide unconditional love."

"The therapy dogs are non-judgemental. They don't care if you wear glasses, braces...they don't care if you stutter," Bellavia said.

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