

Humane Society of Broward County
Animal Assisted Therapy



Wags & Tales Program Guide

2070 Griffin Road, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33328
humanebroward.com

Wags & Tales – Introduction

The Humane Society of Broward County partnered with Broward County Libraries in 2001 and Broward County Public Schools in early 2003 to establish the Wags & Tales Reading Program. Wags & Tales is a research-based reading motivation program for children with reading difficulties. Certified Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) or Education dogs and their handlers visit students at selected schools and libraries to help strengthen reading skills. This program demonstrates how Certified Animal Assisted Therapy and Education dogs and their handlers can be instrumental in improving the literacy skills of children in an effective, unique and, most importantly, fun manner.

Literacy specialists acknowledge that children who are below their peers in reading skills are often intimidated by reading aloud in a group, have lower self-esteem and view reading as a chore. The intent of this program is to have the children read to the therapy animals. The dogs do not comment on inflection, interrupt correct mistakes, laugh at mispronunciations or make fun if the reader stutters or wears glasses. Our Wags & Tales Reading program allows children to read and learn in a non-judgmental environment.

Wags & Tales – Benefits

Statistics have shown that Pet Therapy helps reduce stress, provide comfort and reassurance, and enhance the overall quality of life of adults and children in various ways. The addition of a pet therapy component to an academic reading program can often be the key to helping children get excited about reading and hopefully unlock their love of learning for a lifetime.

Hall's systemic review of literature on canine assisted reading programs acknowledged "that reading to a dog can foster positive attitudes towards reading while also facilitating reading development by influencing positive emotional experiences and/or expectations associated with reading performance" (Hall et al., 2016). According to Hall's review there is also evidence that the act of reading to a dog provides a child with a non-judgmental and safe environment can lead to increased relaxation and confidence.

Several studies have shown an increase in children's oral reading fluency (ORF) during the use of a canine-assisted reading intervention program (Coffman et al., 2023). This increase in ORF may be attributed to the child experiencing less performance anxiety thanks to the non-judgmental presence of a canine. When asked to read aloud in class, many students experience a spike in cortisol and increase in heart rate, but studies have shown that the presence of a therapy dog helps the students body return to homeostasis (Coffman et al., 2023).

Sometimes kids who are learning to read get stressed not because they are incapable of reading, but because they get nervous and self-conscious, they worry about making mistakes or looking less intelligent, and all of these worries make it difficult to focus. When reading to a dog the fear of judgment is removed from the equation. The students can relax and explore their reading skills in a safe and stress-free environment.

The Wags and Tales reading program helps participating students to relax into the situation and feel some joy in the moment. They often begin to look forward to reading instead of focusing on potential inadequacies or dreading the idea of reading. As with all motivational programs, Wags and Tales can have a positive impact on school and class attendance, turning in homework, self-esteem, and forming trusting relationships.

References:

Coffman, A.N., Bernstein, E.R., Davies, S.C. and Justice, A.F. (2023), The Impact of a Canine-Assisted Reading Program on Readers Needing Extra Practice. *Read Teach*, 76: 724-734. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2192>

Hall, S. S., Gee, N. R., & Mills, D. S. (2016). Children reading to dogs: A systematic review of the literature. *Plos One*, 11(2), e0149759. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0149759>

Henderson, L., Grové, C., Lee, F., Trainer, L., Schena, H., & Prentice, M. (2020). An evaluation of a dog-assisted reading program to support student wellbeing in primary school. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 118, 105449. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105449>

How the Program Works

- For Libraries

The Wags and Tales Program has an ongoing partnership with Broward County Libraries. When a library is interested in beginning the program at their branch, they only need to fill out a Wags and Tales Request Form on our website, humanebroward.com. A program coordinator needs to be assigned to handling scheduling and act as a liaison between the Wags and Tales volunteers and the library.

Typically, children work one-on-one with the reading dogs or in small groups. The library's program coordinator needs to be present during the Wags and Tales session to help facilitate a smooth transition of participating children.

Wags and Tales typically occurs once or twice a month at participating libraries. The schedule for the Wags and Tales reading sessions are developed by the volunteer and library.

-For Schools

Once the principal and other leaders in your school have decided this program is appropriate for use, a program coordinator must be appointed. The program coordinator will work with the reading specialist and classroom teachers to identify appropriate students or classes that will participate in the program. The program coordinator will also be present to monitor each Wags and Tales session, unless another school staff member is assigned to do so. Typically, students who benefit the most from this program are those that have the ability to read, but need more time on a task, additional reassurance and/or motivation.

Measuring student progress and program success is an important component of assessment of a student's reading levels before and after participating in the program. This assessment helps determine the impact of the program on individual participants. In addition to charting reading levels, other aspects of a student's performance such as attendance, behavior, and the ability to complete class assignments should be noted.

Once a "reading group" has been established, the program coordinator should select a date, time, and location for the program to be scheduled for your school. This information should be provided to the Human Society of Broward County's Animal Assisted Therapy Program Manager, so an appropriate team can be chosen for the assignment.

Before beginning the Wags and Tales Program in your school, participating students should have signed permission forms to participate in the program. The assigned Humane Society volunteer will be a cleared volunteer through BCPS. The pet's vaccination records and a certificate of insurance can be provided to the school if needed. They are also filed with the Broward County Public School's Superintendent Screening Board.

During the first visit to the class or reading group the pet therapy volunteer will spend a little time with the group to go over "getting to know you" etiquette that should be practiced when interacting with a dog. Once that is covered the reading can begin!

Program Set-Up

Program Supervision

A school or library staff member must stay in the room to help supervise the program. If discipline is needed, either staff or a parent will handle participating children's behaviors.

Session Management

While children are working with the reading dog, other children should be quietly engaged in other activities.

The staff attending can assist in regulating the flow of children to participate and keeping time. Each child should have enough time to read a chapter or small section of a larger book.

Reading Locations

Reading locations should be relatively quiet and free from significant distractions.

Program Coordination

Program coordinators will work with HSBC volunteers to develop a Wags and Tales schedule.

Program coordinators need to advise Wags and Tales volunteers of any schedule changes.

Program coordinators will monitor Wags and Tales sessions or assign another staff member to assist.

To discuss the Wags & Tales Reading Program further, contact the Animal Assisted Therapy Program Manager at therapy@hsbroward.com