

SPECIAL NEEDS & LEARNING DISABILITIES (STUDENTS AND ADULTS)

Libraries • Public Schools • Special Education Programs • Day Care • Group Homes

General Characteristics of these Individuals:

- special education students range from pre-school children to adults up to 22 years of age.
- students with learning disabilities include dyslexia, attention deficit disorder or problems concentrating on and performing tasks for a variety of reasons.
- some cannot work or live in the community on a permanent basis, requiring assisted-living situations or on-going support from day care programs.
- some suffer from a variety of severe physical disabilities in addition to mental challenges and require one-on-one care.
- educational and physical abilities widely vary.
- most have low self-esteem and lack confidence.
- most need physical exercise to improve coordination, concentration, and mobility.
- many have little interaction with the general community.

Canine Considerations:

- only dogs that are extremely patient, confident and comfortable with children can qualify.

Special Challenges:

- because some physical and mental disabilities are severe, volunteers may feel uncomfortable at first.
- most students and adults in special education programs are needy of attention, reassurance and kindness but do not understand personal boundaries. So they may not have appropriate ways to always engage others or to set their own social boundaries.
- most special education students are very sensitive and need extra time to process traumatic events, such as the graduation of other students or the loss of family members or classmates.
- most students with learning disabilities need reassurance and praise, not correction.
- most students with learning disabilities resist any kind of "performance," such as reading to others.
- some may be hyperactive or agitated.
- most have been ridiculed.
- autistic children can be sensitive to touching by others, but often respond to a dog or animal.
 - all students in this population need to count on those who come into their lives, and depend on their teachers and volunteers to keep commitments.

It is a great privilege to be welcomed into the lives of special education or learning disabled students and adults. They have a great deal to teach us.

Handling Considerations:

- canines must be totally confident with children or persons with severe physical handicaps.
- handlers must have good to excellent voice control of canine.
- in group situations and in a secure room with staff present, your canine may be permitted off lead, IF YOU AND STAFF APPROVES.
- carry soft toys for play; grooming tools for brushing, tooth-brushing, bathing and general care.
- use short socks on canine paws to keep rough pads or nails from scratching fragile students.
- working with severely handicapped or very energetic children requires great understanding and patience on the part of your canine. Play periods, outside time, and treats help to offset stress.
- be very clear in setting boundaries with the students and their treatment of canines. Teach "dog talk" or ways to appropriately engage a canine.
- monitor all interaction with the canine rigorously to avoid any accidental injury to student or dog.

CAT Techniques for the Challenges

- brief pre- and post-visit evaluations are necessary for the best interactions. Talk with the teacher about what works best for students and canine.
- be clear about the canine's and your own boundaries. Don't take anything personally. Some students will be fearful, but most will welcome your dog.
- encouragement and acceptance is critical. Avoid correcting students or being solicitous. Look and listen with a dog's eyes and ears.
- be an active problem-solver. Think how you can incorporate your canine into classroom activities, such as language (writing letters to your dog), social skills (grooming and care), or physical activities (games of fetch or going for walks).
- communicate with staff regarding your pet's abilities, training and the topics you can discuss, such as unconditional love, pet loss and grief, animal boundaries, and pet care. Such discussions can reaffirm the ways we can live together successfully.
- physically handicapped students benefit from touching a dog, having someone rub their feet in a dog's coat, or simply lying next to a warm being.
- giving treats can encourage nurturing and loving behaviors from students, as well as motivate more physically challenged students to reach out or move toward the canine.

R.E.A.D. Program Tips

Reading is a complicated act: eyes transfer symbols to the brain. There the symbols are transformed into letters and punctuation, then letters into words, and words into meaning. Next, words are strung together in sentences for more interpretation, then paragraphs and on to pages, chapters, and eventually books.

Reading out loud adds more challenges: Another part of the brain has to apply sounds to the letters and words, all of which is then sent the other areas of the brain where muscles are commanded to articulate intelligible sounds, tones and phrasing to help convey the meaning of what is being read.

Is it any wonder that most students don't like reading out loud, especially if English is not their native tongue, if they are shy, or are laughed at for mispronunciations?

Why dogs can help with this complicated process.

1. Just like patients in health care, dogs help students relax so more of their energy is focused on reading rather than being afraid or worried about how they'll do. (Notice the facial expression of this young reader.)



Dogs see people as potential love targets. That's an enormous advantage we have with students who don't feel lovable.

2. If students are reading to dogs, they know they won't be ridiculed. They can take their time, they can do something special in class, and they won't be corrected for missing a word or not reading perfectly.

After all, their canine listener is more interested in *them* than in how the story is being read.

What to remember—

1. If you volunteer in a school setting, some children may resist your efforts. But your secret weapon is your canine and its unconditional interest and love. Many children are afraid to read aloud because they don't want to make a mistake. Some are overwhelmed; others may have a learning disability or are easily bored and cannot focus. But they all love attention.

2. Incorporate your canine into the session: Ask younger students to show your dog the pictures in the book. If students are older, have them recount what's happened in the story and what they think might happen next. (If your pooch falls asleep, let the students know she's only "resting her eyelids.")

3. If students stumble, let them ask you (or even better, the dog) for help. Don't jump in and correct them. Let students guess or use the pictures for cues, or ask them what they think is going to happen.

4. Set boundaries: put your dog in charge of helping so students don't feel the need to "correct" each other. Insist on kind treatment of your dog (and on another). Encourage children ask permission to pet your pooch. Kids, like dogs, need structure and knowing what to expect and being kind to each other will create a secure and positive setting.

5. Have a treat or a reward for good behavior. For example, if someone is impatient but manages to control herself, let the student give the dog a treat. If some-

one is courageous enough to read aloud for the first time, allow him to give your partner a treat, to pet or brush him, or to accompany you when you leave.

6. Encourage questions. If students want to talk about what they are reading or about related subjects, allow them to do so. Their questions can boost comprehension by reinforcing what they already know and what they are learning.

7. If you volunteer in a library setting, you may have toddlers or "pre-readers" who want to visit and touch your dog. Make sure to have some suitable books on hand to read aloud to a child so you can reinforce the dog/read connection.

Canine-Assisted Therapy for Students & Adults in Special Education Settings

Mental Stimulation:

Encourage students and clients to talk about their own pets or favorite animals. You may also explore topics that relate to the students own feelings: how does Fifi make you feel when you're with her?

Physical Activities:

Many times students and adults are more comfortable in the familiar surroundings of the classroom or facility. Encourage them to walk with the canines, play soccer or throw balls. It's amazing how much they enjoy getting exercise when it's with a dog!

Self-Care:

Having a dog to groom and take care of is another incentive and model for students to also learn to take care of themselves. Brushing the canine's teeth reinforces the importance of dental care. Brushing the coat is relaxing and a nurturing act for both the dog and client.



Social Behavior:

Use the canine to demonstrate polite behavior, such as "shaking hands" to greet people. When people have done kind things for one another, reinforce with special time with the canine. Keep track so that when the canine comes to class, the student can tell the dog what he or she did that was so important or worthy.

Tactile stimulation:

Some students may have a number of disabilities, but still get great pleasure out of feeling a dog's fur, hearing the jingle of a leash or tags, or getting a nuzzle or kiss. They will also respond to hear a dog's panting.

What Else?

Follow-up Activities Related to Pets for Staff and Handlers:

1. Look up a local agility group and see if they can arrange a demonstration for your class. More abled students can even participate with an animal if possible.
2. Find DVD's about animals or pets.
3. Subscribe to pet magazines such as *Cat Fancy* or *Dog Fancy*.
4. Make a special spot in the classroom for visiting CATs. Have a blanket, towels for wet weather, a water dish and handler approved treats on hand.
5. Learn about different breeds on the computer (internet or encyclopaedia software) and tape a national dog show to watch.

Staff Participation:

1. Ask students about the dog after visits.
2. Ask if clients would like pictures taken with the canines (to leave at site).

3. Visit a local veterinarian or animal shelter.
4. Bake dog biscuits or write a letter to the visiting CAT (canine-assisted therapist).
5. Let students draw or photograph canine therapists. Make an album that contains photos, drawings, paintings, stories and comments.
6. Ask students to practice giving commands in a polite voice and remembering to say, "good dog". Later practice shaking hands with canines as an appropriate greeting for humans and other dogs.
8. Have a person from a local animal shelter teach students who to interact appropriately when meeting a dog.

Family Participation: Ask family to

1. Visit during pet therapy.
2. Bring in pictures of client's pets.