

Dog Safety and R.E.A.D.®
A Doggone Great Combination
By Tara McLaughlin CPDT, CDBC

Last spring, Charlottesville Therapy Animals, the Therapy Dog group that I Co-Direct, was asked by our local county school system to pilot a Reading Education Assistance Dog (R.E.A.D.®) program. Prior to my first meeting with the county administrator, I thought about dog attacks and how often they're directed towards children.

Wouldn't it make sense to combine dog safety with the R.E.A.D.® program? Being a Doggone Safe member and licensed Be a Tree™ Program presenter enables me to actually empower children by educating them about canine behavior and body language as well as how to respond when confronted by a dangerous dog. The children would learn how to make good decisions when interacting with all dogs, not just Therapy Dogs.

Our Therapy Dogs can tolerate handling that most dogs find stressful or intolerable. We do not want to confuse kids by allowing or even encouraging them to interact with dogs inappropriately . . . possibly even causing them to be bitten by another dog because of our Therapy Dogs' tolerance.

At the meeting with county administrator, I suggested we first do a Doggone Safe presentation for the class that we would be piloting the R.E.A.D.® program, and the suggestion was enthusiastically accepted. The children and their teacher not only found the presentation informative and educational, but it helped increase the children's confidence with interacting with the dogs selected for the program – one being my German Shepherd Dog, Sattva. Some of the children were worried about being near such a large dog. When we actually started the R.E.A.D.® program, the groundwork for appropriate dog interactions was laid out and our pilot program proceeded beautifully.

This fall, the county has asked that we start the program at additional schools. They have asked that we present the Doggone Safe program county wide in the schools, so all of the children can benefit from learning about dog behavior and body language, and how to safely interact with dogs.

These are the steps we took to establish a successful and safe R.E.A.D.® program:

- Meet with Administrator of School System and School to discuss R.E.A.D.® program and process to pilot program
 - Provide permission forms for teacher to give parents

- Provide evaluation forms for program
- Arrange date for Doggone Safe Presentation in participating classrooms or school wide
- Arrange date for Therapy Dogs and handlers participating in program to visit school when children are not there.
 - Assess room, decide where the kids will read to the dog, and help dog feel comfortable in the new surrounding
- Arrange date for Therapy Dogs and handlers participating in program to visit school for a presentation with class so children can meet dogs and handlers prior to reading to them.
- Set schedule (days/times) for R.E.A.D.® program