

TPOC CHILDREN’S PROGRAMS

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Overview

TPOC dogs are a welcome sight in a variety of children’s programs in which our members are engaged.

- The dogs give emotional support to children in pediatric units of hospitals and special residential facilities for special needs children.
- They are educational assistants in schools where they are powerful motivators to help children learn a variety of skills. Through Paws To Read®, they help children learn to read both in schools and in public libraries.
- In cases of individual work with children on the autism spectrum and the developmentally disabled, they help children develop communication/language skills, socialization, motor skills, improve emotional state and alleviate depression.
- Paws Rooms provide a welcome relief to students facing the stresses of exam time.

Approximately one-fifth of TPOC members have passed the Interaction With Children evaluation.

Work with children, however, is not a job for every handler and dog. It is important for the team leader to properly screen applicants for the IWC and also to assess the proper placement of the teams once they have qualified.

The Benefits of Children's Programs

The following information comes from various research sources on the topic of children and animal-assisted therapy.

Quality of Life

- Therapy dogs improve the quality of life via mental stimulation and learning. Animals are powerful reinforcers of human attention and behaviour. When children interact with animals, they grow to be more persistent and show more positive behaviour changes. The presence of animals facilitates both human speech and nonverbal expression.
- Dogs encourage us to play. Therapy dogs may promote quality of life in children by facilitative play, exploration and independence. Therapy dogs can act as social lubricants to adult-child or child-child play.
- For children, a special dog improves the quality of life through social facilitation and emotional stability.

Learning Skills

- Animals provide tactile and visual connections for children.
- Animals are an attention-getting stimulus and the objects of conversation.
- Children's cognitive development can be enhanced.
- Pets facilitate language acquisition and enhance verbal skills in children. This would occur as a result of the pet functioning both as a patient recipient of the young child's babble and as an attractive verbal stimulus, eliciting communication from the child.
- Therapy Dogs foster socialization, increased responsiveness, facilitate mental alertness and enhance an outward focus on the environment.

Motivation

- Therapy Dogs can increase student motivation and inspiration to go the extra mile. They are a wonderful way to introduce a new skill.
- One study shows that children enjoyed coming to school and were more motivated and cooperated better with each other when "the teacher's pet" was present. Shy children spoke out more.
- Benefits of pets in the classroom have shown increased number of days in school.

- Children are less anxious about leaving their parents and adjust better to new school environment if an animal is present.
- Another pet therapy organization observed less tension in individuals and among the class as a whole as well as significantly improved attendance and timelines when therapy dogs were present in class.

Special Needs

- Studies on the effect of animal assisted therapy and education for children with attention deficit hyperactive and conduct disorders have shown increase in attention span, greater interaction with other people, and significant reduction in recorded behavioural problems.
- Children with autism have more prosocial behaviours and less autistic behaviours such as self-absorption with pet-facilitated therapy.

Empathy & Positive Relationships

- Children begin to better understand themselves in relation to other beings via a relationship with animals. This helps to develop the child's confidence, empathy and respect for other. It teaches respect for life.
- Dog's help others meet and interact with people. They facilitate interactions with strangers and help establish trust and build friendships. They help strengthen present bonds with others.
- Contact with pets develops nurturing behaviour in children who may grow to be more nurturing adults.
- Interaction with animals helps children to bridge feelings of isolation, promote self-esteem and alleviate depression.

Setting up a Children's Program

For a team that is interested in setting up Children's programs there are many benefits – often new volunteers are interested in working with children and we receive a lot of publicity from our children's activities. Any press we have received for our work with children has demonstrated clearly, among other ideas, that dogs and kids can be safe together. This has produced a positive aspect for everyone concerned.

The downside of publicity is that it can generate requests for our service beyond our capacity to deliver the service. We don't have enough Child Certified members to meet the demands for services that arise from publicity. For this reason, we are wise not to promote our children's programs too often; we have a great service, but often not enough teams to deliver it.

If your team wishes to start a Children's Program or has been approached by a school or library please contact the Director of Children's Programs for more information. Often we can refer the interested library or school to another site that already has a program running and will help to answer many of the questions regarding the set up process.

Screening

It takes careful screening on the part of Team Leaders to make sure that a handler and dog truly want to work with children. A person might think it is a great goal to work with children but in reality they can't stand the noise in crowded hallways at recess time in schools; they can't stand the sight of a child that drools or has temper tantrums and falls on the ground. And maybe their dog has the same criteria. Team Leaders should discuss the realities of working with children before a member even signs up for the Interaction With Children evaluation. Team Leaders should also be careful to explain the commitment required to the Children's Programs on behalf of the handlers. There is less flexibility in a library or school programs as these events are scheduled and advertised to families often weeks in advance.

It takes careful screening to make sure that the right dog goes into the right situation. Some handlers would prefer their dog to be in a "sedate" library setting rather than in a classroom with children with autism.

Our Evaluators have the job of choosing the handler/dog teams that will work with children. The dogs have to be practically bomb proof to be able to work with children. If we have learned to expect the unexpected in our work with seniors, the same is perhaps even more true in our work with children. It is not uncommon for our dogs to suddenly be besieged with a class full of children practically falling all over the dog – whilst our handlers must be ready to take charge of the situation the dog needs to be comfortable with that level of attention and we try to ascertain just that through the IWC evaluation.

The Interaction With Children evaluation puts dogs through many and continuous minutes of raucous noise, rapid movement, food temptations, group crowding along with a requirement to be able to settle quietly and listen to a few words of a story.

General Guidelines For Working With Children

As with any TPOC visit your dog should be clean and brushed, nails short and smooth. Child Certified dogs must wear their TPOC vest – it is an important teaching tool for children to identify the Therapy Dog as a safe and approachable dog. We remind them that the vest indicates a special dog who is approachable. Take your dog's TPOC blanket/towel for your dog to lie on. Wear your TPOC uniform shirt.

Remember to sign in the TPOC book at the hospital, facility, school or library.

Arrive on time.

Keep your visits/working time to approximately one hour.

Ensure that the sessions take place in an area of high visibility – volunteers should not be alone with a child out of sight of a staff member.

Note: Do not bring any food, particularly nut products into visits with children.

Paperwork

We must always seek to obtain parental consent when working with children unless the visits occur in a hospital as part of a regular therapy visiting program where patients come and go through the facility.

For other facilities – schools, libraries, treatment centres the following documents are required:

- Informed Consent
- Child Media Image Release (not mandatory – it may not always be possible or appropriate to take pictures)

Paws to Read®

When setting up a program in a library suggest a 6-8 week schedule with 5 timeslots. Children should register for the entire program – you may wish to add a shorter session at the end to allow for try-outs where a child comes for a single session before signing up for a full program.

Libraries will tend to run in line with their program sessions – fall/winter/spring. Many teams have experienced a drop off in attendance in summer sessions and so do not schedule programs at that time.

Participation

Ideally librarians will pre-screen* families or be able to recommend the program for children who need the most help. Paws to Read should not be promoted as a ‘fun’ event without regard for whether the child actually needs assistance or not.

The purpose of Paws to Read ® is to help the reluctant or struggling reader gain confidence. Whilst reading to a dog maybe fun for any child we are trying to provide a service to those in greatest need.

You may occasionally find families referred to the Paws to Read® program who are not struggling to read but who experience difficulties in other areas – focus, social situations – these children will also benefit from regular sessions with the dog.

* Library can offer the program by lottery only due to limited space. Librarian may utilize a registration form which asks parents to identify any particular issues the child needs help with. The Librarian can then assign placement according to the needs of the children.

Timing

Team Leaders should work with the librarian or teacher to set up a schedule. Be wary of librarians wishing to extend the timing.

Typically the child will spend 10-15 minutes with the team, though this can be shorter in school settings where the teacher may wish to send more children through the program. Remember the dog may only work for around an hour.

Set a clear schedule. Encourage the families or teachers to ensure the child arrives on time ready to read.

Let the child meet and greet your dog for a short time. Some children are all business: they bring their book, they are ready to read and they don't want to waste time socializing. Other children only want to socialize; you need to steer them toward the task at hand, which is reading.

Reading Material

It is extremely important that the child brings material commensurate with their actual ability. Ask the librarian / teacher / parent to help with this.

Once you know the children who are enrolled – have a selection of books available in the immediate area so that if they finish early or come without a book you can quickly provide an alternative.

Some children choose the book and get great pleasure from choosing a book they feel is appropriate to read to the dog.

Site Considerations

Whilst it is important for the team to be in full view of staff, it is helpful if the child feels there is some privacy to the session and they are not being asked to read to everyone in the area.

If you are working in a public library, discourage parents/guardians from sitting with their children.

If you are comfortable sitting on the floor, work on the floor with each reader who comes to read to your dog. If you prefer to sit on a chair, ask the child to sit on a chair, at the same level as you. Remember to have your dog lie/sit on their blanket.

The child should always sit at the same level as the handler with the dog in-between – it is important to foster a comfortable and relaxed environment with the emphasis on reading to the dog.

Coaching

We are there to facilitate the dog listening to the child – we do not teach or instruct the child. Tell the child they can ask for help if they want to. Rather than the child becoming frustrated you can suggest a strategy to help them sound out a word or simply tell them the word. If the book is illustrated you may suggest a clue from the picture. You may wish to speak to a teacher or parent before the first session to see what strategies the child is familiar with.

It is important not to correct the child if they make an error – the premise is to have them try reading without feeling judged and allowing them to build their confidence when reading out loud.

It is a good idea to make sure the librarians familiarize the parents with the strategy of the program when they sign up and encourage the parents to allow the child to participate on their own rather than observe the session closely.

Program Management

It is often more critical for the volunteer to attend Children's programs on a regular basis – these sessions require commitment to a specific schedule agreed to by the facility, family and team. If a volunteer needs to cancel the visit due to illness etc. – please ensure there is a contact protocol in place. Either the team leader should be contacted directly so that they can arrange for someone to cover the session or they can inform the library who will in turn call the families. It is not enough to leave messages and assume the information is passed on.

Acknowledgement

It is appropriate to acknowledge the child's participation in a program by presenting them with a small token – perhaps a personalized bookmark / certificate which simply states they have completed the program and thanks them for being a good friend to the dog – it should avoid any assessment or mention of skills.

Special Needs Placements

If you are working with special needs situations, there must be a meeting with the Therapist/Teacher/EA prior to visitation to consult on the special needs of the child. Ask if there are any allergies to dogs amongst the children you will be visiting.

Dogs must be on leash at all times in the handler's hands. If a dog is to assist in physiotherapy which may involve any change to regular handling i.e. take part in double leash walking activities the team leader must apply for permission through the Special Visit request form, submitted to the Director of Children's Programs.

Work with staff to select the work area and goals of therapy. Do not allow staff to manage the interaction with the dog, for example push your dog into position or “steer” your dog at any time.

Paws Rooms

Please refer to the separate document Secondary School Paws Room for the specific guidelines.

Daycare Visits

If contacted by a Daycare the Team Lead must ensure that it is a licensed facility. Since most daycare visits will deal with pre-school children the sessions are often more a show and tell or part of an animal theme week.

Private home daycares must provide a copy of the business license/certificate issued by their local city/municipality and also proof of insurance The Team Leader must forward a copy to the Chair & Director of Children’s Programs.

Ratio of pre-school children to adult carers must be no more than 4:1.

Ratio of school-age children to adult carers must be no more than 6:1.

When visiting a home daycare there may not be any other animals on the premises with the exception of caged birds or other small animals contained in a cage/enclosure.

Regular visiting policies are to be applied i.e. visit lasts for 1 hour. Informed Consent forms and Media Image Release forms should be provided and completed by the parents prior to any visit.

Special Requests

If you are asked to provide a child focused visit which is not a regular program i.e. therapy visit in a healthcare setting, Paws to Read® or Paws Room we ask that the team leader submit a Special Visit request and submit to the Director of Children’s Programs. Once a request is reviewed this allows us to specify any special conditions or policies which should be applied. It also allows TPOC to understand where our CC teams are visiting and what type of programs facilities may find helpful. This may identify a future need or program that TPOC should formalize.