

Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

WITH THE KIDS

Good reading is a pet project

Dogs are not only man's best friend, but some reading programs are finding they make pretty rapt audiences too.

By Brenda Rees
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One such program, Barks and Books, sponsored by the Pasadena Humane Society, lets children practice their literacy skills by reading aloud to a friendly and attentive dog.

"I think I read better with the dog," 9-year-old Cleo Khanlari says while waiting to participate in another reading session at the Glendale Central Library. "You don't have to think about doing anything wrong or worry too much because, well, it's a dog, not a person.

"I really like dogs too. I wish I had one."

Indeed, the library buzzes with excitement as Baltic, a 7-year-old German shepherd — all ears and wide-eyed — arrives for literacy duties. Eager children, many regulars of the program, greet Baltic like adoring fans backstage at a rock concert. "Ooh! Can I pet her?" "Do we really get to read to her today?" "This is so cool!"

Baltic laps up the attention and praise, but once she's led into the reading space, she settles down and gets to work.

"Her job is to give unconditional attention and love," says owner Karen Saunders, who has another dog, an 11-year-old golden retriever, that's also in the program. "Dogs are always very interested in what the kids are saying. Dogs don't judge and are very happy just to sit and listen but love it if you gently pet them when you read."

As the kids take turns reading, Baltic remains steadfast and watchful, even when she leans up against readers and often places her head on or near their laps. She occasionally rolls on her side to invite a belly scratch.

"It takes a very special and patient dog to do this kind of work," says Elana Blum, humane educator at the Pasadena Humane Society, who helped bring the program to the area two years ago.

Blum's pack of volunteer library dogs includes a Bernese mountain dog, a Great Pyrenees, a boxer, a poodle and a corgi. All dogs have passed behavioral requirements and have been temperament tested.

But it's not just dogs that make the program work, Blum says. "Owners have to have a good rapport with children," she says. "They volunteer because they really want to help kids become better readers."

Saunders is in the room with Baltic as parents, friends and even teachers bring kids in for canine time. She listens to the stories with her dog, helping readers with complex words and encouraging timid kids to "tell Baltic what you see on the page."

Today Ruwani Wijesuriya, a first-grade teacher at Mark Keppel Elementary School, has brought in a student who struggles with speaking in the classroom.

"He's been practically mute for so long, but we are finally getting him to talk more in class," she says. "We bring him here to keep encouraging him to open up. He did a great job today reading with Baltic. It's very exciting."

Readers can bring their own books or pick out ones from a nearby cart — all with dog themes and protagonists. Sometimes there's very little reading, as in the case of 4-year-old Jacob Juarez, who, without uttering a word, patiently showed Baltic pages of a picture book. Baltic was mesmerized.

In the end, after all the "I Read to a Dog Today" stickers are passed out, Saunders packs up and waves goodbye, walking her dog toward the door. Baltic eagerly surveys the room, looking for perhaps another pet behind the ears, a final hug, a scratch or maybe — who knows — just one more book.

Barks and Books: Locations and times

Arcadia Public Library, 20 W. Duarte Road, Arcadia. (626) 821-5567. 11 a.m., third Saturday of every month.

Glendale Central Library, 222 E. Harvard St., Glendale. (818) 548-2035. 3 p.m., first and third Tuesday.

Pasadena Central Library, 285 E. Walnut St., Pasadena. (626) 744-4066. 11 a.m., second and fourth Saturday.

Hastings Ranch branch library, 3325 E. Orange Grove Blvd., Pasadena. (626) 744-7262. 3:30 p.m., second Tuesday.

La Pintesca branch library, 1355 N. Raymond Ave., Pasadena. (626) 744-7268. 3 p.m., second Thursday.

Santa Catalina branch library, 999 E. Washington Blvd., Pasadena (626) 744-7272. 3 p.m., second and fourth Thursday.

San Raphael branch library, 1240 Nithsdale Road, Pasadena (626) 744-7270. 2 p.m., second and fourth Monday.
Info: To learn how dogs and owners can become part of the Barks and Books program, contact the Pasadena Humane Society at (626) 792-7151, Ext. 124.