

Humane Society and libraries hold "dog days" this summer for young readers

Daisy, Fletcher and Merlin were all ears as youngsters read aloud to them at the Walhalla branch of the Oconee County Public Library. It didn't matter that the trio did not understand a word read to them. They were just happy to be there, being petted and scratched under the chin and behind the ears. Dogs are easy listeners, which is part of the reason the library system and the Oconee County Humane Society are sponsoring the "I Read to Animals" program.

"I Read to Animals" is a project of the Humane Education Program of the county's Humane Society. Its purpose, says Suzanne Daddis, education program leader, is to inspire the next generation to be more aware of companion animals and to be advocates for the animals who need our compassion and care.

"This program, held in public libraries or schools, was developed by the Best Friends Animal Society in Utah -- the largest animal sanctuary in the country," said Ms. Daddis. "It's designed for children between the ages of 5 and 12, teaching them the basics of animal care and welfare and giving them the opportunity to read to a certified therapy dog or an AKC certified Canine Good Citizen (CGC) dog. We want this to be a safe and easygoing time for dogs and the kids."

What's more, says Christin Hirleman, youth service librarian, the program encourages reading and provides a non-judgmental reading environment. "Dogs don't care how well you read. They just enjoy the companionship. For the children, the setting -- the petting and patting -- takes their minds off the pressure of reading out loud, letting them focus on the words and pleasure of the books and the animal's company."

The mixing of reading and dogs has been a howling success. More than 150 children have signed up so far to read to the dogs. "We can use other animals, but dogs have been most available. Besides, cats can be a challenge on leashes," said Ms. Daddis.

At the end of the program, the children are presented with their own "pet" -- a small stuffed dog that has a battery-powered bark and glow light. The children also sign a pledge, promising to be faithful companions for their play pets. "We hope that by the end of the session," says Ms. Daddis, "that the children realize, unlike their toy dogs, real pets need care and attention to live long, healthy and happy lives." Sessions continue through July at libraries and children's centers.

For more information, visit <http://www.oconeehumane.org/education.php> or contact Suzanne Daddis directly at education@oconeehumane.org or 864-884-9984.