



# Innovative Reading Programme

*The Order of St John together with Auckland SPCA*

## INNOVATIVE READING PROGRAMME WILL BENEFIT MANY

The Order of St John Northern Region and Auckland SPCA may seem unlikely partners in a reading programme. However both these organisations do have a focus on schools. For a number of years the Outreach Therapy Pet programme has had a team of volunteers who visit schools to help support children with reading difficulties. More recently the SPCA Auckland has identified the need to start teaching animal welfare and correct care and handling of animals from a young age in order to ensure the right attitudes towards animals as they grow into adulthood. The SPCA Auckland Education Manager has developed an education programme that links into the existing primary school curriculum and it was trialled in 8 schools across Auckland during 2014.

It was decided to explore the possibility of joining forces in a project to test and establish an animal assisted, goal oriented therapy programme that aligned the work of the Outreach Therapy Pets (OTP) teams working in schools with the SPCA Education programme. The pet partner team works with teachers to help students achieve goals through provision of varied learning contexts that enhance learning and teaching and it was thought that working within the SPCA learning modules would enhance the success of the goals of both organisations.



St John's OTP and SPCA hope to eventually work together in schools to provide young people with the opportunity to interact, establish relationships and bond with animals. This is designed to build empathy and an understanding of the responsibilities and costs of caring for an animal while developing reading confidence and skills.

A Working Together More Fund grant of \$8500.00 was approved late in 2014 to cover some one-off costs to help establish the project model. It was used to support two symposiums for Outreach Therapy READ teams in Auckland and Kerikeri to increase programme awareness and consider how the team could link most effectively with the SPCA's education programme. It was also used to supply uniforms for team members and their dogs, cover travel costs, supply reading resources, and produce ID cards for dogs on the team. Unfortunately the joint project had to be put on hold for 2015 as the SPCA Auckland wanted to conduct further trials with their education programme before launching it to the wider school network.

One teacher noted in the work the OTP has been doing already “The whole class benefits”. She saw children with special needs “enjoy reading aloud to the dog because it doesn’t judge their reading success,” while more able readers enjoy the companionship. Children also learn about animal welfare and overcome any fear they have of dogs as “they realise the dog is calm and predictable.”

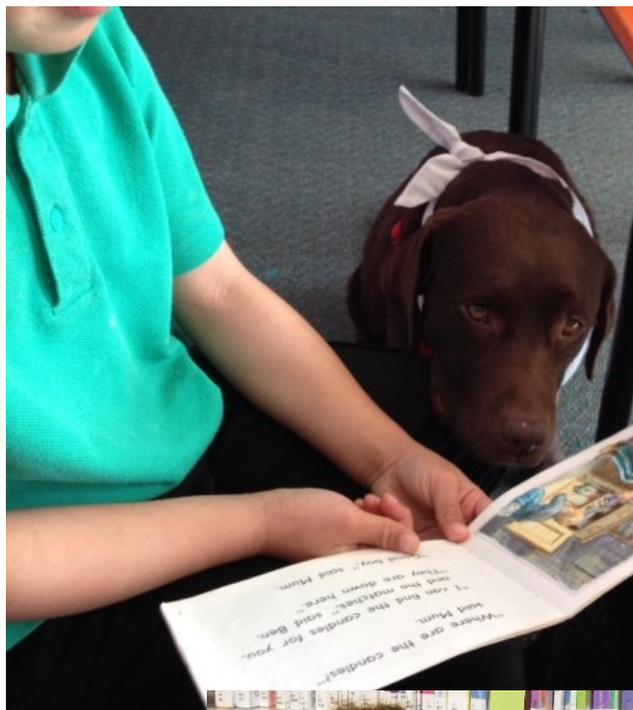
Volunteers have seen children “gain multiple reading years in a single term, shy children come out of their shells, and watched children who don’t like school turn up every Friday for the chance to read to the dog.”

To achieve the even better result than hoped for openness and honesty about all the positives and potential negatives is important. The OTP READ team members were invited to approach their schools to gauge interest in being involved and this will ensure they are actively engaged in the SPCA programme once the project is launched. Clear and open lines of communication were critical. Any problems in the project were the result of not identifying all stakeholders early enough, which caused temporary interruptions as they were brought on board.

The programme is now being readied to launch in 2016.

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