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Studies Track Improvements in Grade School
Language Studies

It turns out dogs are not only good for our health; finding missing people; and helping disabled people live independent lives – they're good for kids' report cards, too!

Canines have been found to improve the immune system and reduce blood pressure, among other health benefits. They help rescuers and law officers, blind people and those with limited use of their hands and arms. Now we have another reason to celebrate man's best friend.

"Dogs not only help children learn to read, they help children learn to love reading," says Michael Amiri, coauthor with his wife, Linda, of the children's book, Shellie, the Magical dog (www.shelliethemagicaldog.com). "And that's true of for children with and without learning disabilities."

A Minnesota pilot project called PAWSitive Readers finds that trained therapy dogs helped 10 of 14 grade-school participants improve their reading skills by one grade level. Additionally, a University of California study showed that children who read to the family dog improved their ability by an average of 12 percent.

Amiri discusses five reasons why dogs help kids learn to love reading:

• No embarrassment: "Most of us have memories of reading out loud in class," he says. "Though we may have been proficient readers, the fear of stumbling on a word in front of everyone was a constant source of anxiety." Dogs are excellent for unconditional, nonjudgmental love; they won't laugh if and when mistakes happen.

• Confidence boosters: "I never had a dog while growing up, which is too bad because I think I would have had an easier time gaining self-confidence," says Amiri. As an adult, he discovered the many benefits of dogs through he and his wife's very special Maltese, Shellie. She's often the center of attention in their community at pet-friendly restaurants, where she laps her water out of a martini glass. And she has a full-time job as the greeter at Linda's hair and nail salon. "If a little dog can give me, a grown man, more confidence,

imagine what it can do for kids," he says.

• Polite listeners: Like humans, dogs are social creatures and most enjoy the sound of a calm voice speaking to them. Many – except perhaps the most energetic breeds – seem to enjoy curling up on a rug and listening to a story being read aloud. They don't interrupt (except for the occasional ear scratch or to sniff a body part) and they often show appreciation for the attention.

• A fun approach to schoolwork: Too often, when children think of studying, they think of time spent hunched over a desk struggling alone to work out problems and memorize lists. Interacting with a lovable, fuzzy friend for an hour of homework is an appealing alternative.

• Win-win: A canine-student reading program is a great way to help service dogs-in-training learn patience and discipline. Dogs are trained to help veterans suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, the blind, and people who use wheelchairs, among others. These dogs in training help children, while children improve a dog's service abilities.

About Michael and Linda Amiri

Michael Amiri grew up in New York City and became an actor in local theater productions and television commercials. Linda Amiri is an entrepreneur, the owner of a successful hair and nail salon. Their personality-plus Maltese, Shellie, is a popular community character, who puts in a full day of work every day as a greeter at her "mom's" salon. She's the inspiration for the first in a series of children's books that will address topics and issues of concern to children.