

Canines for Christ

Study Buddies

Therapy dogs are growing in popularity in schools and libraries across the land. Various organizations already exist to provide training and support for canine visiting teams interested in working with children in academic settings, and now Canines for Christ is among them.

Probably the most common use of dogs in the classroom is “listening” to children practice their emerging reading skills, but there are so many other uses to consider:

- 🐾 Provide a non-threatening avenue for children to practice basic academic skills such as math facts and spelling
- 🐾 Provide emotional support for children who are stressed, angry, upset, fearful, or just in need of a furry friend
- 🐾 Encourage positive behavior in the classroom by using the visiting dogs as a behavior intervention or incentive
- 🐾 Build confidence in children as they learn about self-control and how to interact with a dog in a positive, centered way
- 🐾 Use dogs as ice-breakers or object sessions to teach elementary spiritual truths to children from God’s Word

So that brings us to Canines for Christ Study Buddies. Our target group is children in schools, after-school clubs, libraries, other literacy focused environments, and church based children’s programs. Our mission is to provide academic, spiritual, and emotional support to children in the name of Jesus.

Perhaps God is calling you to such a ministry focus. If so, ask for his leading as you read further and learn more about Canines for Christ Study Buddies.

Getting Started

As with all ministries, the first step in getting started is to seek the Lord, asking him in prayer to guide you and order your steps as you proceed. Second, you and your dog will already need to be a Canines for Christ ministry team. Third, honestly evaluate your canine volunteer. Does he like children? Are his temperament, age, and overall health suitable for working with active little ones who may need an extra measure of patience? Fourth, you should ask yourself the same questions. Are you flexible enough to adjust your methods of visiting to meet the needs of ever changing, developing young people?

Canines for Christ

Study Buddies

Steps to Implement Classroom Visits

Meet and Greet

This is an essential step that is foundational to everything that you will do later. Take your time!

It has been the experience of volunteer teams in the field, that many children lack experience (let alone positive experience) with dogs and need to be expressly taught how to be around them. In a school setting, it is recommended that you schedule a 10-15 min. initial classroom visit to introduce your canine companion, talk about dog behavior, model how to greet a dog (see photo to the right), and let those children who wish to do so practice their greeting skills in a controlled setting. Here's a sample schedule of an initial visit:



- 🐾 5-15 min., in the building - *Arrival* - Get there a little early in order to acclimate your dog and his senses to the building. When visiting a school, you will likely need to check in with the office and receive a visitor's pass.
- 🐾 5-10 min., in the classroom - *Introductions* - Introduce yourself and your dog, adjusting according to the ages of the children. From preschool through grade one or two, your introduction should be straightforward and simple. Children in this age range learn a lot about community helpers and jobs, so a brief explanation of the "jobs" a therapy dog does is appropriate. For children older than that, you may want to discuss the differences between therapy and service dogs. Don't forget to tell a little bit about yourself and your dog so the children feel a connection to you both.
- 🐾 5 min., in the classroom - *Up Close* - It is recommended that the children stay in their seats for this initial close-up meeting while you walk your dog around the classroom - pausing to let him sniff and get a pat from those children who wish to do so. Before doing this, it is good to let the children know they do not have to pet your dog or let him sniff them - that it won't hurt your feelings (or your dog's either!). Assure them that you and your dog will only stop if the children have their hand out as pictured above, and if they don't you will walk past them.

Canines for Christ

Study Buddies

Next 1-3 Visits

The next series of visits is designed to acclimate the children to your canine companion and him to them. The number of visits recommended at this point varies depending on the age and maturity of the children along with the structure of the class. When my large dog visits very young children, I gradually reduce the distance between them over time, reinforcing appropriate behavior around dogs at each visit.

It is important to help children understand that dogs don't think like people nor do they interact with their surroundings in the same way. Don't assume children will know this without being expressly taught and don't think they will remember from visit to visit - especially in the beginning or if they are very young children. Here are some things to reinforce:

- 🐾 Dogs do not have hands like humans and must use their mouths to manipulate their environment much in the same way humans use their hands. The big difference here is that dogs' mouths have teeth that could inadvertently hurt someone who is not mindful of this dog fact of life.
- 🐾 Dogs do have a highly developed sense of smell. Children should be taught a dog gets to know and remember through his nose. Explain this is one good reason to hold your hand at nose level (see photo on page 1) rather than over a dog's head which is common behavior among many youngsters.
- 🐾 Dogs often react to the energy level around them. Teaching the children to take a deep breath and get themselves centered is beneficial to them (and your dog!) enjoying a calm and pleasant visit.
- 🐾 Children must know that it is never okay to rush at a dog or stick their faces in the dog's face.

Modeling what it looks like to read to a dog is a great activity during this set of visits. You can do this by first reading to the children - occasionally looking at your dog or showing him pictures, etc. Your end goal is to get the children ready to interact with the dog at his level in such a way that they both feel comfortable.

What's Next?

You are now ready to settle into a regular routine of weekly, biweekly, or monthly visits. These work best with small groups of children - either individually or no more than 3-6 at a time - and for not more than 20-30 minutes a visit. It is helpful to give your classroom teachers specific ideas for the visits - whether for children to practice their oral reading, review other basic academic skills (math facts, spelling, test prep in any subject, etc.), or to encourage and/or reward positive classroom behavior. One idea for this last use is to let children earn Study Buddy Time in order to spend short amounts of time with you and your dog. Walks in the hallway with you and your dog

Canines for Christ

Study Buddies

would be a great way to reward an attained behavior goal, help a child practice self-control, encourage confidence, and even give an active child a little movement break from the routine of the classroom.

Whatever activities you and your teachers select, it is very important to remember YOU are the handler and YOU are the one who must be present and supervising any and all activities. You should constantly be assessing the situation and not feel bad if you need to remove your dog from an environment that is overly stressful or unsafe for him or the children he is visiting.

Canines for Christ

Study Buddies

Reading List

10 Ways Your Dog Can Help a Child Develop Emotional Intelligence - <http://www.dogtipper.com/tip/2015/03/10-ways-your-dog-can-help-a-child-develop-emotional-intelligence.html>

Developing Fluent Readers - <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/developing-fluent-readers>

Developmental Milestones - <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/signs-symptoms/developmental-milestones>

Fluency: Instructional Guidelines and Student Activities - <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/fluency-instructional-guidelines-and-student-activities>

Interactions between Children and Dogs - <http://www.peteducation.com/article.cfm?c=2+2100&aid=628>

Kids and Dogs: How Kids Should and Should Not Interact with Dogs - <https://drsophiayin.com/blog/entry/kids-and-dogs-how-kids-should-and-should-not-interact-with-dogs/>

Sample Study Buddy Goal Sheet

A goal sheet that can be used to help children set and attain goals is included on the next page. These goal sheets can be used for academic or behavior goals and should be completed by the teacher and student together to determine the appropriate criteria to be met in order to earn Study Buddy Time. Paw prints are colored in as the child succeeds in meeting his/her goal. This particular sample is most suitable for children in third grade or below.

Canines for Christ

Study Buddies

My Study Buddy goal is

Student Name

