

Hudson loves being the center of attention in a group of children

CLASS ACTS

The first-grade boy didn't like reading—or even trying to read. He'd fallen behind during the pandemic and felt embarrassed in front of his classmates, so he'd just shut down and refuse to participate, looking at the ceiling or fiddling with a pencil.

That changed last fall when a Labrador Retriever named Hudson started visiting classes at PS9 The Sarah Smith Garnet School in Brooklyn, New York, according to the child's teacher, Lydia Babbit.

"With Hudson, he sits down with her, puts his hand on her head, and reads to her," she says. "If he makes up a word, it's fine—he uses the pictures to guide him. It makes me so happy to see. This has been an experience that has helped him come out of his shell and feel more comfortable reading for himself, but also reading for someone else."

Therapy dogs like Hudson are part of The Pet Care Trust's Dogs in the Classroom pilot program to introduce 100 schools across the country to the

benefits canines can bring—while collecting data and testimonials from teachers along the way to gauge its success.

Babbit said this is the first time in her 15-year career that a therapy dog has joined her class, and she's extremely impressed with the positive impact Hudson has on her students.

For example, one child expressed a deep fear of dogs. But Hudson won him over with her gentle, friendly demeanor, and he now hugs the Lab every time she comes to visit. In fact, all

the children know to line up to greet Hudson when she arrives—and that if they're good, they can give her a bone-shaped treat to take home.

The dog has proven to be immensely helpful with helping kids develop social skills, calm themselves down, and adjust to being in a classroom in what has essentially been their first year of in-person classes due to the pandemic, Babbit says. Learning about therapy dogs before the first visit proved fun for them—but meeting her

LYDIA BABBIT



Studies have shown that a therapy dog like Hudson can enrich learning in many ways.

has been even better.

“The children just cannot wait to see her,” she says. “It’s been an amazing experience.”

Teachers’ Pets

That’s the sort of positive feedback the Dogs in the Classroom program has been garnering from teachers across America, according to Matt Coffindaffer, executive director of The Pet Care Trust. The nonprofit has awarded over 197,800 grants to teachers (pre-kindergarten through 9th grade) in the United States and Canada for classroom pets since 2011.

Classroom pets offered through the nonprofit’s Pets in the Classroom program—which has the goal of aiding the social, behavioral, and academic development of students—are typically small animals like guinea pigs, birds, fish, amphibians, and reptiles. So partnering with

the nonprofit Pet Partners to provide therapy dog teams for the Dogs in the Classroom initiative complements the existing program, Coffindaffer says.

“It’s all about the human-animal bond, and it’s about the unique way that children interact with dogs,” he says.

The Pet Care Trust provides a toolkit to participating teachers to help get their classrooms ready, implement the program with administrators, consider potential issues like allergies, and learn about resources to promote academic growth through therapy dog interactions.

Some participants in the pilot program are classrooms in Title I schools with a large percentage of the student population living in poverty; others educate children with special needs or offer early intervention, Coffindaffer says.

While the nonprofit is still collecting quantitative and qualitative feedback, initial findings point to success, according to Coffindaffer. Many teachers have shared testimonials about the therapy dogs helping return a sense of normalcy to their students after the challenges of the pandemic.

Others have sent stories of children who once feared dogs learning to embrace them, or who said that spending time with a therapy dog was “the one positive to their day.” Students in Connecticut even told their school psychologist that the therapy dog who visits is their “antidepressant.”

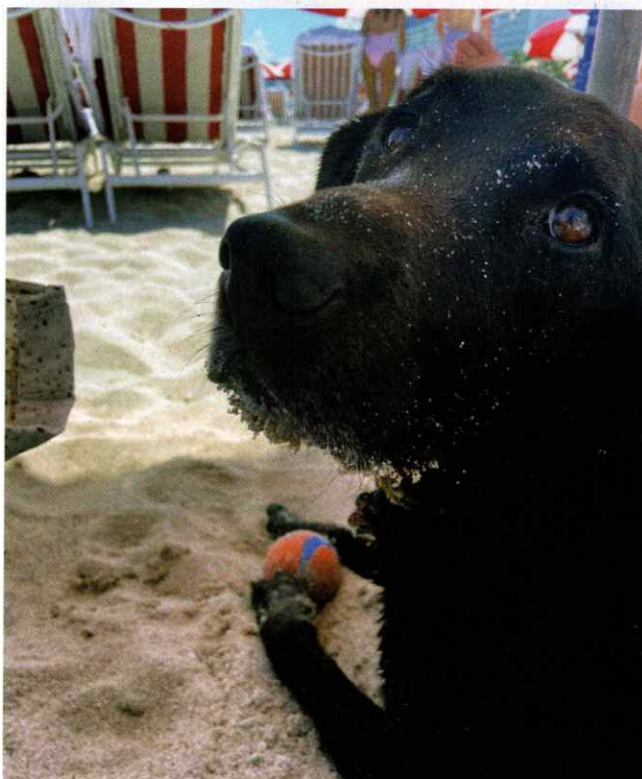
“It’s been very impactful,

very powerful,” he says. “I think it’s going to be a huge part of our grant offerings in the coming years.”

B is for Belly Rub

In 2019, The Pet Care Trust conducted a study with two other nonprofits—American Humane and the Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI)—to explore the impact of pets on third- and fourth-grade students in the United States. Results showed that classroom pets helped improve social skills and reading competence, and decreased problem behaviors like hyperactivity and inattention.

“Overall, these results suggest that classroom pets



Eat, Play, Love: Hudson works hard. Downtime at a beach with a ball helps her unwind.

can enrich learning environments in meaningful and diverse ways,” says Steven Feldman, HABRI’s president.

Another HABRI-funded study found incorporating therapy dogs into social skills training for children with autism proved more beneficial than training without a dog. Benefits for students include fewer restricted and repetitive behaviors, more social

communication, and decreased feelings of isolation and depression.

Research has also found that therapy dogs can benefit students of all ages—from preschool to college. They can be a great motivator, improve test-taking and listening skills, help calm anxious students, and promote self-confidence, impulse control, and respect for others, among other



The children pick a book to read to Hudson. She favors books about dogs.



How to Get Involved

As evidence continues to mount about the benefits of therapy dogs for students, demand will certainly grow in classrooms and on college campuses. Private citizens can volunteer with their pets through national therapy animal nonprofits like Pet Partners.

Additionally, the Association of Animal-Assisted Intervention Professionals helps educators, health care providers, and other professionals offer animal-assisted interventions with their own pets. For more information, visit petpartners.org or aaaiponline.org.

attributes, Feldman notes.

“Scientists believe animals present good learning opportunities for children because they allow children to observe unpredictable, novel information while also being emotionally engaging,” he says.

“Incorporating therapy dogs in classroom and educational settings is a powerful way to help more children access the scientifically documented benefit of the human-animal bond.”

While therapy animal visits can help students and teachers, the activity also benefits the dogs themselves. For instance, Hudson loves being the center of attention when she visits students at the elementary school in Brooklyn, says her handler, Sarah Kate Wagner.

“They pet her belly and they read [to her]. She loves it,” Wagner says. “It’s a lot of mental stimulation. So she takes a really long nap when she comes home.”

Since the children usually get to pick a book to read to Hudson, many choose books about dogs, from

science books to the picture book classic *Harry the Dirty Dog*.

“She loves all books about dogs,” Wagner quips. “She’s just very sweet.”

Wagner, who works remotely for a tech startup, loves seeing her dog’s effect on the students they visit, like watching them build confidence by reading to a nonjudgmental listener. One second grader was so happy while waiting for her turn with Hudson that she was almost shaking because, as she told Wagner, “I’m just so excited.”

“It’s nice to have a volunteer outlet where I know what we’re doing is good,” she says. “To have a direct impact with students is rewarding.” **FD**

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.

For more information, visit petsintheclassroom.org.

TOP: LYDIA BABBIT; BOTTOM: COURTESY PET PARTNERS