

IT'S ALL IN THE DELIVERY



Reading Lab's Karen and her Service Dog Gypsy: making children feel good about learning to read.

Access to support is just one part of the picture when it comes to providing resources to anyone with a different need from the majority. In some instances, being the one who needs to access extra help or resources also carries the burden of being singled out, and there's nothing much that's positive in that.

But they say if you can turn a negative into a positive, you are onto a winner. That's exactly what Assistance Dogs Australia has done with their Reading Labs program – and kids with literacy issues are the winners.

We all know literacy is a life-changing skill set but children who find reading a chore don't have our old heads on their young shoulders. They just know it's hard to do, it isn't fun – and they get singled out, ridiculed and sometimes bullied for their poor reading skills. None of that encourages a child to persevere. It's more likely to push them towards a false bravado and the development of some possibly quite impressive – but ultimately self-defeating – avoidance skills.

Assistance Dogs Australia's Reading Labs program has put a whole new spin on support programs for children who need extra help with reading. The children are still required to participate in extra reading tuition but, along with their human tutor, they have a canine one in the form of a trained Assistance Dog, to whom they are encouraged to read aloud in a relaxed and fun environment. The Assistance Dog's owner and trainer can join in, helping the children with unfamiliar words and improving comprehension by asking the child to explain the story to the dog as they go along.

Assistance Dogs Australia's official Newshound, Amanda Hope, says the program is a wonderful opportunity for schools and for community-minded

Assistance Dog owners too.

"Our Assistance Dogs will not only have changed the life of someone with a physical disability, now they are also enhancing the lives of children in the classroom," Amanda says.

"Teachers have reported that students who have behavioural and psychological problems are benefiting from the calming influence of having a dog to read to."

The stars of the Reading Labs program, currently operating in Victoria, are Karen and her Service Dog

Gypsy. In fact, it was Karen's sister, Michelle, who suggested it. She had seen a similar program running in the UK so, when Karen and Gypsy first teamed up five years ago, she proposed the idea to Karen and to Assistance Dogs Australia.

Now Karen and Gypsy spend two days a week volunteering at a local primary school. On one of those days the pair will be in the library and, as Karen says, Gypsy "puts her listening ears on" for several children while they practice their reading.

"I love helping the kids and being part of the community," Karen says.

Through her time in the school with Gypsy she has seen children transformed from reluctant pupils into pupils eager to read with their special furry friend.

The Reading Lab program is just one of a range of programs run by the Assistance Dogs charity. Their trained labradors and golden retrievers assist people with disabilities in their homes and out in the community, routinely picking up dropped items, opening and closing doors, paying cashiers in shops and dealing with the phone.

Since 2002, they have also operated the Pups in Prison program, through which selected inmates participate in training pups to become assistance dogs to meet the ever-increasing demand and,

in the process, are assisted with their own rehabilitation.

The special chemistry that can exist between a dog and a person is, Amanda says, the reason these programs work so well. For children with a learning difficulty such as reading, a dog can be the best audience. There's no judgement and no paralysing risk of looking silly.

"And the children learn that Gypsy is not just a dog," says Karen.

"They know I need her to help me. She picks things up, empties the dishwasher and drier and answers the phone. So the children are also learning about people with disabilities and how to deal with them as well."



It takes \$25 000 and two years to train an Assistance Dog. Want to know more? Visit www.assistedogs.au

oneumbrella
.com.au

Recruitment Specialist for the
Library & Information profession