Getting Children BARK Ready! – Lesson plan for therapy dog handlers in schools

Educational program aimed at children from families that are thinking about adopting a dog

Tag words:  Dogs, Kids, Children, Therapy Dogs, Dog Bites, Animal Safety

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Video link:  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ur15h7o2H-o&feature=c4-overview&list=UUts4_1WyqXMmVDfu9ZffstA

Summary: We have developed an educational program for children to provide information on
the proper etiquette when around dogs and to prepare them for the responsibilities of dog
ownership. The program would use therapy dogs to give children in small groups real
interactions and hands-on experience with a dog. The class could be offered by certified therapy
dog handlers at schools, community events or summer camps. Compensation for the hours
served in providing the dog etiquette program would be facilitated through a community
exchange or time bank, giving the handler and the school/organization an incentive to be
involved in a positive way with their community.

Dog Ownership is on the Rise
American families love pets and ownership of four-legged friends is on the rise throughout the
country. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), there were
approximately 43 million dog-owning households in the United States in 2012 (AVMA, 2012).
This trend should come as no surprise as even the first American settlers kept dogs as
companions and humans have enjoyed the strength of the human-animal bond for thousands of
years (Schwartz, 1997).

There are also an enormous amount of positive correlations and research investigating health
benefits of dog-ownership, including benefits to those battling obesity, depression and high
blood pressure. The health benefits are seen in anyone that may have contact with a pet,
including children. One study found that children with a dog spent more time performing
moderate to vigorous activity compared to children from families without a dog (Owen et al.,
2010). In a time where rates of childhood obesity and inactivity are increasing, having a family
dog could counteract this trend and help reduce the health problems associated with obesity.

Children are at Risk: Need for Education

Unfortunately the human relationship with “man’s best friend” is not always peaceful or
beneficial and can come with some risks. There are thousands of dog-bite incidents reported
each year, with approximately 400,000 of those reported occurring with children (CDC, 2008).
Children seem to be most at risk because of their size and poor socialization around dogs leading
to behavior that a dog may perceive as erratic or threatening. A surprising statistic is that about
half of all bites to children are inflicted by the family dog (AVMA, 2012). Because of this, it seems of utmost importance for any family that is considering bringing a new dog into the home to prepare their children for life with a pet.

Many organizations, such as the AVMA and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), recommend education programs to help combat dog-bite problems. Public education strategies should include school-based and adult educational programs addressing bite prevention and basic canine behavior, care, and management. It seems one that is aimed at children, especially focusing on how to behave around the family dog, would be critical to reducing the number of attacks each year. One study conducted in Australia examined and compared the behavior of children between the ages of 6-7 around an unknown dog. The study separated the children into 2 groups, with one group receiving no prior instruction and the other group receiving an instructional lesson prior to exposure to a dog. The lesson was taught by a therapy dog handler and included instruction involving interaction with a therapy dog. The results of the study showed that the group that received the lesson displayed more calm and cautionary behavior when they approached the dog (Chapman, S., Cornwall, J., Righetti, J., & Sung, L.). Studies like this show how a simple lesson could be very helpful in combating the dog-bite problem in our country.

There has also been additional recent research suggesting that the use of therapy dogs in early childhood education encourages learning. Programs that involve therapy dogs in the classroom have shown improvement in things such as reading skills, confidence and stress in children (Jalongo, M., Astorino, T, Bomboy, N., 2004). Using a therapy dog in the classroom to teach about proper behavior will not only teach an important lesson but will be one that leaves a positive and lasting impact on the child.

Providing an educational program for children would also have the added benefit of reaching the parents or guardians by sending each participant home with an informational pamphlet relaying pertinent information to consider before adopting or buying a dog. Educating dog owners prior to their adopting a dog will address many common issues. Information such as understanding breed profiles, considering neutering or spaying to decrease aggressive tendencies and teaching the importance of socialization and obedience training may decrease the risk of dog-bite incidents and possible surrender to a shelter (Sacks et al, 2000).

Relinquishment to Shelters on the Rise
With an increase of dog-ownership, there is also the unfortunate increase in dogs that are surrendered to animal shelters or euthanized every year. The Humane Society of the United States HSUS) estimates that approximately 6-8 million cats and dogs are surrendered to the over 3,000 U.S. animal shelters each year (HSUS, 2013). It is clear that many American families are often not prepared for the major responsibility involved with dog-ownership.

It is important anyone that is contemplating getting a new dog also considers additional factors to ensure a smooth transition into the family and low likelihood of future relinquishment. Things to consider would include how a new pet will fit in with any children; specifically are the children mature enough and ready for the responsibility and behavior required with having a dog. Also important to consider is what breed, type and age of dog is best for their situation and how to accomplish proper training of the dog once it is brought into the home. A well thought out plan
would allow the family to take an honest look at their situation and make the best decision for them, while also reducing the chance that the dog will end up euthanized or in a shelter.

**Existing Dog Etiquette Programs**

**Be a Tree Program**
Currently there are programs offered nationwide that aim to teach children valuable safety lessons regarding their interactions with dogs. The “Be a Tree” program is a presentation created by a non-profit organization called Doggone Safe and is endorsed by many professional organizations. The program is presented by a “canine professional”, which could include a veterinarian, dog groomer or dog trainer and claims to be a fun and interactive way to teach kids about dog behavior. The program encourages children to “be a tree” when they are approached by a strange or over-excited dog that could potentially harm them. They are encouraged to be still and stare at their feet (the roots of the tree) to avoid excited movements and making eye contact, which could cause a dog to stress and attack.

While this program has many attributes and gives children basic information about dog behavior and how they should behave, it does not include any hands-on interactions with dogs. The program uses illustrations, photographs and interactive games to get the message across. The developers of the program claim that having a dog in the classroom would actually be distracting so the teachers sign an agreement that they will not bring a dog when they teach the class. Additional information about this program can be found at [http://www.doggonesafe.com/Be_a_Tree_program](http://www.doggonesafe.com/Be_a_Tree_program)

**American Humane Society’s KIDS program**
Another educational program for children is offered by the American Humane Society (AHS) and is called the “Kids Interacting with Dogs Safely” (or KIDS) program. This program was launched in 2009 as a response to the growing number of dog-bite incidents in young children. The program uses teachers, humane educators and parents to educate children to not be fearful of dogs. The program stresses for children to be empathetic toward dogs and to keep in mind how a dog may feel as a consequence of their behavior toward it.

This program’s lesson plan also has many positive features and uses games, songs, 12-minute video and coloring worksheets to teach children about dog safety. This program is another that does not include any hands-on interactions with dogs, which could be a valuable tool to getting the message across. Additional information about the KIDS program can be found at [http://www.americanhumane.org/interaction/programs/humane-education/kids-kids-interacting-with-dogs.html](http://www.americanhumane.org/interaction/programs/humane-education/kids-kids-interacting-with-dogs.html)

**What is a Therapy Dog?**
A therapy dog is a dog that is trained and supervised by a handler and provides humans in need with appropriate hands-on contact with an animal. Therapy dogs are often brought into facilities such as nursing homes, schools and hospitals to socialize with the people that are there. These dogs are specially trained, meet specific health standards and are either certified or registered by nationally recognized organizations including, Therapy Dogs International (TDI) and Pet Partners. Therapy dog handlers are responsible for their dog’s (which is usually their personal
pet) healthcare, registration/certification fees and any costs associated with providing their services. In addition, therapy dog handlers are not compensated for their services and typically sign an agreement that they will not accept payment but will only work with their dogs on a volunteer basis. Therapy dogs are different from service dogs, which are recognized and protected by the American Disabilities Act, in that they are not trained to accompany or perform tasks for a person with a disability.

**Getting Therapy Dogs and Their Handlers Involved**

It is obvious that therapy dogs and their handlers provide a valuable service to the public, while expending money, time and resources of the handler. As a means for compensation, as well as to make getting involved in programs such as this one worthwhile, community time banks can be used to recognize the value of their generous service. A community time bank aims to bank on each other’s expertise and strengths by providing gifts of time and talent in a pay it forward model. This system uses a time currency based on equality as a means of sharing our wealth with others in the community, such as artisans, land stewards, growers, technicians, educators, professionals and service providers. Using a time bank would recognize their service and time in a concrete way.

We are proposing that the therapy dog handlers offer their services through a local time bank. The hours that they provide their services would be “banked” in a Time Bank. They could then utilize the hours that they’ve banked to receive needed services from another member of the community member that has skills and talents (like a plumber, electrician, lawyer, gardener, dog walker) that they could utilize. All the services, whether offered or received, do not cost money - all services would be free of charge. However, they would be allowed to accept compensation for travel to the place of service if they wished (or was offered).

**Community Action: Proposed Early Childhood Education and Preparation**

**Proposal for Interactive “BARK Ready” Program**

Building on ideas and features of existing programs, it is proposed to develop a program that will prepare young children for an expected or potential adoption of a new dog in the home using therapy dogs to give them real interactions. It is important to go through a short lesson using photographs and videos before children meet the dog. After that portion of the lesson is complete and the children feel confident and excited about meeting a dog, the therapy dog can be brought in and the children can take turns petting and brushing the dog while the instructor continues with the lesson using the dog as the model.

This program would take the positive attributes of the “Be a Tree” program, including how to read a dog’s behavior and how to act when they are upset. It would also include the empathy lessons that the “KIDS” program teaches, so that children will develop an understanding that dogs also have feelings and to be respectful of that. Additionally, this program would include real interactions with a certified therapy dog while supervised by the teacher, giving a valuable interactive lesson that videos and pictures cannot convey. A program like this would be different in that most current programs have goals of educating children how to behave around dogs which is an important lesson for safety. Because a large number of dog bites occur between
children and their own pet, it seems like additional lessons in proper treatment and behavior around a real dog may be helpful.

**The Lesson Plan**

Age Level: Recommended for children age 3-7
Subject: Safety and Proper Care of Dogs- “Are you ready for a dog? Get BARK ready!”
Objectives and Goals: To teach children how to be prepared for the responsibility and potential risk that comes along with getting a pet dog. They are taught a lesson that includes fun pictures and interactive games with lesson focusing on becoming BARK ready: 1. Be calm around your 4-legged friend; 2. Always have an adult around when you are playing with your dog; 3. Respect your dog’s space; 4. Keep away when your dog is sleeping, eating or seems unhappy. A therapy dog is brought in at the end of the lesson so children have an opportunity to interact with a real dog while supervised. The teacher can give feedback to parents and make recommendations for when and what type of dog would be best for their family.

Direct Instruction (8-10 minutes): Using photographs and/or illustrations, the teacher would give a short lesson on how to interact with your new dog in the home or outside. The teacher will introduce students to becoming BARK ready and will engage by asking questions and allowing children to participate. Will give examples of proper behavior and not recommended behavior.

Watch a Video (3 minutes): Teacher will show video that includes examples of how children should behave around their dogs

Interaction with Therapy Dog (5-10 minutes): Children will take turns petting therapy dog. Teacher will monitor proper approach and ensure that they use points from lesson while around dog.

Review of becoming BARK ready and conclusion: Review with children the lesson of becoming BARK ready, hand out stickers signifying that children “passed” the BARK ready course.

**Getting the Word Out About Becoming “BARK Ready”!**
The creation of a program like this would take community outreach and involvement. It is possible that organizations like the Red Cross, YMCAs, local libraries, schools or community centers might be interested in running the BARK-ready program for local children. Initially, it would be wise to start small and conduct a trial run of the program in a small setting to gauge interest and effectiveness of the program. Starting with counties in NJ, we would contact therapy dog handlers and tell them about the program. Then we would contact a local school or organization that may be interested in hosting the program. The following letters will be sent out to schools and therapy dog handlers that may be interested in participating in the program:

**Letter to school**

To Whom It May Concern,
I am writing to tell you about an exciting new program that we have developed to prepare children for the upcoming adoption of a new dog in the family. It is called Get Your Child BARK Ready and will be offered to children from the ages of 3-7 years old at a local school.
program’s main objective is summarized by the acronym BARK and teaches children the following points: 1. Be calm around your 4-legged friend; 2. Always have an adult around when you are playing with your dog; 3. Respect your dog’s space; 4. Keep away when your dog is sleeping, eating or seems unhappy.

This program is aimed at preparing children for the risk and responsibility that comes along with having a dog for the first time in their home environment. Children have a very high risk of being attacked by dogs because of their size and behavior, and a surprising number of dog-bite incidents occur between children and the family dog. Unfortunately when a family is not properly prepared for a dog in the home, children in the home are also in jeopardy. Additionally, when a dog is brought into an unprepared household it is more likely to be relinquished to a shelter or euthanized.

Taught by a registered therapy dog handler, we are hoping that our program will build confidence and bring awareness to children while exposing them to a well-mannered and registered therapy dog. We are hoping that your school would be interested offering this opportunity to the students and will host this program. Please contact us and let us know if you are interested.

Sincerely,

Renee Rose & Dr. Julie Fagan

Letter to Therapy Dog Handler

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing to tell you about an exciting new program that we have developed to prepare children for the upcoming adoption of a new dog in the family. It is called Get Your Child “BARK Ready” and will be offered to children from the ages of 3-7 years old at a local school. The program’s main objective is summarized by the acronym BARK and teaches children the following points: 1. Be calm around your 4-legged friend; 2. Always have an adult around when you are playing with your dog; 3. Respect your dog’s space; 4. Keep away when your dog is sleeping, eating or seems unhappy.

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We are trying to find certified dog handlers and therapy dogs to be involved with teaching the program to children. As a means for compensation, we will work with a community time bank so that you are “paid” for your generous work in a concrete way. Time banks are a great way to connect others in the community, such as artisans, land stewards, growers, technicians,
educators, professionals and service providers. The system provides a way to bank on each other’s expertise and strengths by providing gifts of time and talent in a pay it forward model. We hope you and your therapy dog will be interested in getting involved with the “BARK Ready” program. Please contact us so we can give you more details.

Sincerely,

Renee Rose & Dr. Julie Fagan

References


