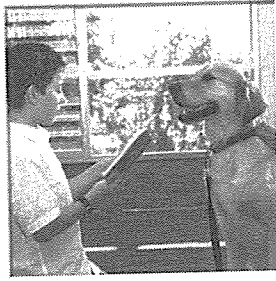


A BaRKing Good Idea



Flash's black eyes are sparkling, his fluffy ears are alert and his body is relaxed. He's sitting on his favourite mat listening to the melodious words flowing from a young boy's mouth. Flash, an eight-year-old labradoodle, only gets to do this for one hour once a week, but the effect he has on the children that read to him will echo throughout their lives.

Earlier at home, when Flash's owner Jill put his Delta lead on, his excitement escalated. He knew the special day had come and he jumped in the car and headed off to the Toronto Library, Lake Macquarie, where nine-year-old Jack was waiting for him, book in hand. Jack and I had been working together in an after-school reading improvement program for several months – I'm a senior lecturer in the School of Education at the Avondale College of Higher Education – before I discovered the BaRK (Building Reading Confidence for Kids) program, run by the Lake Macquarie City Library and the Delta Society.

The program was advertised in the local newspaper and immediately caught my attention. Such a fascinatingly innovative approach to

learning needed to be investigated! Upon inquiry and parental consent, we were able to place Jack in this program. The aim was to help children increase their confidence and enjoyment of reading and to improve their literacy skills – all with the help of Flash the dog!

My colleague and I followed Jack's progress with great interest during his involvement with the BaRK program. Once a week, for eight weeks, Flash listened to four stories read to him for fifteen minutes each by Jack and three other children who lacked reading confidence and motivation.

After each session, Flash's owner Jill would say to Jack, 'You read that story so well. Flash loves the stories you choose – thank you.' Then it would be Flash's turn to repay Jack by showing him his well-rehearsed tricks. Jack's delighted laughter made Flash try even harder, and then Jack gave his doggy friend a treat for his good work.

After eight weeks in the program, Jack's progress was amazing. With Flash's help, Jack's reading comprehension had improved so dramatically that he was measuring above his age group by almost twelve months, and his reading accuracy improved by eleven months!

The look on Jack's face when he received a book and a certificate for completing the program was priceless. We hope that Flash knows what a very special dog he is and that he keeps helping kids discover their love of reading for many years to come.

Barbara, Cooranbong, New South Wales