

Carmel Library Matches Young Readers and Dogs



Photo: Kelli Uggall

Maya Yamada, age 4, practices reading to Kasey and Maggie, beautiful Samoyeds owned by Patti and Michael Emmett.

With her head on the floor between her feet, Maggie might not look like a mentor, but to the children who visit the Park branch of Harrison Memorial Library each month, the dog is a patient listener and friend.

The purebred Samoyed, along with her brother Kasey, are the ever-smiling pilot dogs in “Read to a Dog,” a literacy program started by children’s librarian Grace Melady, who says she was inspired by a library in her native Canada. “My sister’s co-worker saved me an article of a program. When I worked in Monterey [Public Library], I was interested but didn’t have time to start,” she says.

The 15-minute reading sessions on select Saturday afternoons are open to all ages, but especially those children who enjoy the relaxation of reading to a very soft-coated and non-judgmental companion. In other library programs across the country where dogs are used with early readers, both adults and children report more success with reading, by not experiencing criticism while engaging in a fun activity.

“We get the most positive feedback from this program,” says Melady, who owns two small dogs herself. “It’s very touching and rewarding. The

kids learn, relax, learn about the dogs, and have fun.” The Samoyeds’ owner Patti Emmett sits with the dogs and children, plus takes the dogs to champion shows for their breed. Maggie is a certified therapy dog, while Kasey is in training for his certificate. One of the main qualities that marks a good reading dog is its willingness to lie attentively or sit still.

Generally, the librarians will display dog-related books, such as “Clifford the Big Red Dog” or “My Dog is as Smelly as Socks,” for kids to read in the cozy picture book room, or they may choose their own.

Teachers and parents are fond of the method for coaxing reluctant readers. “Once a young girl came in with a letter for Maggie,” Melady recalls. “But she was too shy to read out loud, so the mother read with the girl on her lap. On her next visit she brought a toy for Maggie, and read the book in a whisper.”

In addition to the joy and novelty of reading to a dog, children are rewarded with a greater love of reading, and “really cute” library dog bookmarks.

The children’s Park branch library in Carmel offers reading time with the dogs once per month. Call 831/624-4664 to reserve a spot.

—Catrina Coyle