

Dogs help schools lick bullies

Presence reduces aggressive behavior, keeps kids engaged

By Sharon L. Peters
Special for USA TODAY

Your pet can teach, too

Family pets can help teach respect, empathy and compassion — just don't expect to replicate the results of a formal curriculum presented by trained experts. Tips from trainer Thompson:

- ▶ **Emphasize the animal's comfort**, making sure there's always water, that it's fed on a schedule and is included in the family.
- ▶ **Never use physical punishment or harsh language** when Fido does something unacceptable. For example, talk about why he chewed something — left alone too long, no appropriate things to chew on — “so the child begins to think about if he were in the dog's shoes. ... That's empathy.”
- ▶ **Involve kids in vet visits and pet food shopping** so they develop an awareness of helping others, “especially those who are smaller, more vulnerable or without a voice.”

Sweet-natured dogs lolling about classrooms are helping take a bite out of bullying — and other bad behaviors — in Kansas City, Mo., schools.

No More Bullies teaches, with dogs' help, responsibility, compassion, self-control and integrity. Since its small launch five years ago, teachers and counselors have become so convinced of the positive impact on kids' behavior that it's booked into the 80-classroom max it can handle, and there's a long waiting list of requests for next year.

The curriculum, developed by ex-teacher Jo Dean Hearn, humane education director at animal rescue group Wayside Waifs, is presented an hour a day for five days by trained volunteers — accompanied by irresistible canines.

“The animals are the glue that helps the children stay focused and understand the message,” Hearn says.

Adds teacher Peggy Everist: “There's a lot of specific language, like being fair and using compassion or integrity, that plays out with the students throughout the year.”

A growing number of programs use animals to get kids' attention while teaching respect and conflict resolution. Most are free; some charge nominal amounts to cover expenses; some help schools apply for grants to cover costs.

Mutt-i-grees, a program from the Yale University School of the 21st Century and the Pet Savers Foundation of



Hands-on learning: Aquil Hameed pets Wally while Cedric Alexander answers a question about integrity put to the fifth-grade class by Jo Dean Hearn.

North Shore Animal League America, is just barely out of the gate and is already in 900 schools in 28 states. The curriculum consists of at least 25 age-appropriate 30-minute lessons, each aimed at building social and emotional skills.

Real animals aren't necessarily in the classroom (though some teachers invite therapy dogs, and many visit shelters). Teachers use dog-shaped hand puppets as instructional aides for younger grades; animals are the pivot point of lessons; and there's information about keeping safe around dogs developed with dog trainer Cesar Millan, whose foundation pledged \$1 million.

“It's a highly scripted, user-friendly ... blueprint teachers can adapt to their own styles and needs,” says Matia Finn-Stevenson, an expert on child development, schools and learning and director of Yale's School of the 21st Century. She and her team have spent two years developing the Mutt-i-grees curricula now used in two grade ranges (pre-K through third grade, and grades 4 to 6). Grades 7 and 8 are in testing.

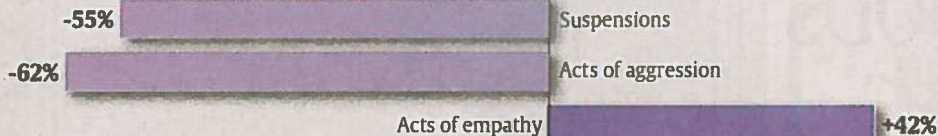
Why it works is simple, says Finn-Stevenson: “Children have an affinity for animals. When animals are the topic of their writing or reading exercises, they are engaged.”

The long-term effect on civility is indisputable, says Cheri Brown Thompson, founder of the Orangeburg, S.C.-based Healing Species, a decade-old program that uses rescued dogs in a 13-week classroom course. “Even academic scores go up,” she says, citing the group's studies comparing standardized test scores a year before and after the class. “The teacher is spending less time refereeing, and kids settle down better.”

Thompson aims to interrupt the violence cycle she learned about in law school: Most violent offenders “were abused as children and began abusing animals when they were still children. The missing component is compassion ... not receiving it and not understanding what it is. We can teach compassion. What better way than through a rescued dog that returns love even in the face of hate?”

Kids learn canine kindness

After students took a 13-week South Carolina program:



Source: University of South Carolina research

By Frank Pompa, USA TODAY