

On the positive side: Children's stories can teach valuable pet lessons

By Jean Gilbert

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Stories for young children can be incredibly fun to read and memorable for their content or message. Consider the story of Hally Tosis, a cute little brown mutt who belongs to the Tosis family.

She is a lovable critter and valued for her loyalty and social nature, especially as a playmate for the children. However, Hally has one major problem. She has awful, stinky breath! It is so strong in scope and degree, she knocks visitors nearly senseless from the smell while flying up to their laps to deliver welcome "kisses" with her tongue licking all over their faces.

During a warm greeting to Grandmother Tosis, and in a flurry of slobbery kisses mixed with unpleasant odors, Halley causes an uproar by unseating the woman and spilling her cup of tea. The parents are furious and conclude the dog's bad breath is intolerable. Hally will have to find a new home.

"Dog Breath, The Horrible Trouble With Hally Tosis" is a clever and comical story written by Dav Pilkey, and, yes, it ends happily. The story always elicits lively discussion about dog behavior, training and citizenship skills, and lends itself to teaching children about pet-care needs, including dental care.

A logical tie-in to the story is a teeth-brushing demonstration by a qualified or trained adult with a cooperative dog accustomed to the practice. A good candidate or participant for this activity is my own dog, who accompanies me sometimes for humane education presentations. She loves the meat-flavored toothpaste made especially for pets and welcomes regular teeth brushings as a treat.

Connecting children to literature and humane principles through stories about animals is fun and rewarding. The children's familiarity with pets and the general knowledge they bring to the reading environment, combined with their interest and love for animals, makes discussion very easy.

In the Critter Connection Reading program at the Las Cruces Boys & Girls Club, adult volunteer readers bring a wealth of knowledge to story content by animating the message with their perspectives and they make reading enjoyable and comprehensible to the children.

Stories are often used as a springboard for activities, too, depending on the leader's interest and resources. For example, TheraPaws' volunteers bring certified dogs who listen to children read or the dog's owner reads to the children with the dog showing the ability to sit-stay calmly and obey commands through demonstrations emphasizing citizenship and training skills.

Critter Connection Reading began in the summer at the Boys & Girls Club, lead by the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico with volunteer participants from R.S.V.P., TheraPaws, animal advocate groups and private citizens interested in literacy and working with youth. Sessions are held weekly on Thursdays at 4 p.m. for about an hour. Whether you come to Critter Connection Reading with a pet or not, volunteering is highly recommended for the simple reward of making a difference in the enrichment and education of children at the Las Cruces Boys & Girls Club.

If you would like to volunteer, please contact the Las Cruces Boys & Girls Club at (575) 644-5331 or Jean Gilbert at (575) 522-2529. Volunteers are always welcome and invited to come when their schedule permits.

Jean Gilbert is a humane educator with HSSNM and offers presentations on request at schools and youth-affiliated organizations.