

On the Positive Side: Stories about cold winters teach us about keeping pets warm

By Jean Gilbert

Posted: 12/18/2010 07:28:58 PM MST

The recent blast of cold weather combined with the holiday season makes us think of winter with a capital W.

Some of us are singing "let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!" The most hopeful ones are the kids. They're ready for those winter experiences rare in Las Cruces: sledding, tubing, and making snow angels.

Critter Connection sessions are led by the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico for Boys & Girls Club youth in Las Cruces. At this season part of the fun is this anticipation of snow with storytelling and extension activities.

Classic stories like "Frosty the Snowman" and "Snowy Day" by Ezra Jack Keats delight children with their portrayal of extraordinary play experiences possible only in snow.

The stories heighten interest in weather, change of seasons and - among other things - learning to read a thermometer. With a canine character inserted in the story line or an ambassador dog attending the presentation, more possibilities are created for discovery and knowledge. At the Critter Connection, children learn about weather precautions for pets and special considerations for their care and well-being during winter.

Children learn a lot from the behaviors and expressions of individual dog guests. For example, an ambassador dog attending one day's "Snowy Day" presentation rests peacefully on a blanket during the story but slinks away with tail between legs when fitted with a sweater.

The owner/educator decides to use a toy demo dog instead for modeling the sweater, and mentions appropriateness for the apparel. She explains why the ambassador dog isn't forced to wear clothing, while some dogs like sweaters and actually need them during wintertime. This depends on their breed, physical characteristics, and length of exposure outdoors.

The educator notes that this ambassador dog lives indoors with her year-round and sleeps near the foot of the bed. In winter she is covered with a light blanket at night.

A dog happily tags along with children while they ice skate and coast down the snow covered hills in "Frosty the Snowman." The children at Critter Connection ask if it's safe for the dog to run loose without a leash, and for how long in freezing temperatures? The story highlights the social nature of dogs with information about their emotional needs for companionship and affection (not unlike humans).

The educator emphasizes training for safety reasons and good citizenship. The ambassador dog present for that day's telling of "Frosty the Snowman" knows something about citizenship, dating back to early post-puppy days as a young adult. At that time the primary goal was for her to respond to her name when called. The educator cites a scary mishap when the dog got loose. If she had not learned to respond to her name it could have been tragic: she could have been struck by a car on the street that day.

This ambassador dog excels in citizenship now. She's a senior at 13 years old, and delights children with an abrupt and intuitive "sit" or "stay" before being instructed, anticipating savory dog treats. She loves kids and couldn't be happier with her role in humane education, lending her presence to stories of a winter wonderland.

Jean Gilbert, a retired elementary school teacher, serves as humane educator with the Humane Society of Southern NM. She leads "Critter Connection" and "Snooter Club" with Las Cruces Boys & Girls Club youth. She also leads a weekly social-enrichment program for HSSNM foster animals, serving as coordinator for youth and adult volunteers. For more information regarding HSSNM services and programs, all 523-8020 or check online at www.hssnm.org