

# Weekly R.E.A.D.®

Reading Education Assistance Dogs®

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## Autism: One Child's Experience with R.E.A.D.

We at R.E.A.D. are not experts on autism and its many and varied manifestations, but our experience is growing. One thing that always seems evident is the power of animals to bring people toward a healthier balance. For a child with hyperactivity, the dogs help them calm down, focus and stay with a task. Children with autism have been observed to cease repetitive behaviors and get more interested in "something" (the dog) outside themselves. Listening also seems to improve.

Mary Domes, of Dogs of Endearment in Wisconsin, tells us, "My dog, Journey, and I have been active in the R.E.A.D. program for two years now. Journey is my fourth Delta golden retriever and second R.E.A.D. dog. He is eight years old and loves his 'listening hour' each month at the local library, the Southwest Public Library in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

"We have especially enjoyed reading with Joshua, a 7-year-old boy with autism, but knew little of the background until recently when I received e-mails from Sandy, Josh's teacher, and Ginger, his mother. How beautiful it is to read their observations from two different, yet related viewpoints. I wish you could meet young Joshua; through him, I'm better understanding what this love is truly about. I thought Journey and I were just helping kids learn that reading is fun."



### Turning Pages — Touching Hearts (by Joshua's therapist, Sandra Jonas, ABA Therapist, Kenosha, WI)

I have had the pleasure of working with Joshua for the past 2.5 years. As part of his therapy, we now do weekly public outings to augment peer interaction and appropriate play skills, develop appropriate social behaviors, increase socialization, and build self confidence when interacting within the community. Joshua has been involved in the R.E.A.D. Program for the past 7 months. He has come to adore his favorite new reading buddy, Journey, and eagerly awaits each new reading session with great anticipation. The heartwarming appearance of this sweet child standing at the front door of the library lobby, waiting for "his" Journey to arrive, is a touching sight to behold.

Over the years, I have witnessed Joshua's growth in not only physical stature and development but in his cognitive and social maturation as well. Reading to the dogs provides Joshua with the wonderful opportunity to socialize within a nonthreatening environment and also allows for individuality and creativity. I have observed the manner in which the dog owners allow children the freedom of personal expression and the opportunity to build their confidence. The dogs "listen" with unconditional love, while the owner provides continuous positive reinforcement and praise. And yes, if one were to quietly peek in the room as the child is reading, one can see the love shine in the eyes of the dog owner as well. From my viewpoint, it's a win-win situation; more than one heart is touched during these special moments.



## Joshua's Journey (by his Mom, Ginger Rasmussen)

Joshua is seven years old, my middle child, one of four brothers and a little sister. At first glance, one would simply see a gangly, fair-haired, blue-eyed boy who is always asking questions and in constant motion. You would not see an autistic young man who could not speak words until he was four years old, who prior to that could communicate by sign language alone.

You would not see an autistic boy who also has cerebral palsy, who would flap his arms and hands uncontrollably at the sight or mere thought of a ceiling fan. You would not see a little boy who lacked empathy or social skills. Instead, you see a smart, curious boy who learned his academics and speech from occupational, physical, and speech therapies, as well as specialized autism therapy in the home 25 hours per week for years through Wisconsin Early Autism Project. Joshua could be taught many, many things, but never learned about emotion or empathy. He never really loved or felt other people's emotions. He appeared "normal" but was missing a piece of the puzzle. He knew what crying meant and laughing meant, but really did not care unless it was his emotions. We did not really know if he would ever develop this part of his soul and as he got older, we just dismissed the possibility until Sandy, one of his therapists, started taking him to read to the dogs.

We knew Josh was not mean to animals as we had pets of our own. He was mostly indifferent, as though they were a piece of furniture or a stuffed animal. But we began to notice a change in Josh. A few weeks after he began reading to Journey, he started petting his own dog and cat. He started talking to them and interacting lovingly with them. He eventually bridged this new awareness even further, into relationships with his siblings and parents. He began caring and asking why the baby was crying or why mom was happy. He began to care about others. He began to feel empathy. Reading to the dogs gave him the last piece of the puzzle to make him whole. It opened up a part of him deep inside that even years of therapy and encouragement and human love could not. The quiet, patience of a dog opened a door that we thought was locked forever.



As Mary Domes and Journey have discovered, R.E.A.D. is almost always about much more than learning to read aloud. It is a full-spectrum experience that benefits children in many significant ways that we are often not even aware of. Thanks to Mary for sharing, and thanks to all of you for leaving such beautiful pawprints on so many hearts. — Kathy Klotz, R.E.A.D. Salt Lake City