



## Press Release

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### **Brock researchers partner with community groups on unique children's learning initiative**

Thanks to community support from a local Niagara school board and dog therapy program, a Brock University professor is researching the role that animals play in promoting basic social and emotional competencies in children.

The project, led by developmental psychologist Christine Tardif-Williams, is looking at children from St. David's Public School who have been taking part in a "reading buddy" program offered by Therapy Tails Ontario, a non-profit group from Welland, Ont.

Every week Grade 1 and 2 students at the school are paired with a dog that they interact with and read to for about 20 minutes. The goal of the activity is to help develop a companion animal bond for the children in the context of a reading activity.

But Tardif-Williams' research is about more than just observing children reading to a "dog buddy."

"The research suggests that companion animals can serve as a social lubricant for shy children," she says. "So the question we're examining focuses on the impact of pairing children with a dog 'reading buddy' over the course of a year."

"To what extent does this experience with the animals promote reading enjoyment and confidence and more empathic and prosocial responses toward both companion animals and peers following the program?"

The Child and Youth Studies professor and her team have been working with teachers, parents and children at the St. David's school collecting data since September.

"As child educators, we see the value of being involved with this kind of research at our school," says Tammy Chilcott, principal of St. David's Public School.

"We're pleased to be a community partner on this initiative that will help us to better understand the social and emotional development of our children, along with the value of special supports we put in place to strengthen learning," says Chilcott. "We believe that nurturing the social and emotional development of children makes them more ready to meet diverse learning challenges each day."

Researchers have collected pre-test baseline reading level scores and social-emotional outcome measures – like shyness and social preference – as well as empathy measures and data on the children’s attitudes toward and treatment of animals. Every week since then they’ve collected observational data of the children reading with the dogs to capture overall reading enjoyment and confidence levels.

Thanks to the co-operation of parents, researchers have also been able to embed a comparison group into their project. Another group of children will begin reading to the dogs this month so researchers will be able to compare this group’s pre-test results to data from the group of children who have been working with the dogs since September.

“A group of parents were generous enough to say that, ‘it’s ok if my children take part in the study now, but do not start actually reading to the dogs until January for the sake of strengthening the research study,” says Tardif-Williams.

“When we look at previous programs in the literature it’s really hard to get a comparison group, so that’s the really exciting thing about this project,” she says. “This is something happening in the community that will have a significant impact on our understanding of children’s relationships with animals and the connection with children’s social and emotional development.”

Researchers will begin collecting post-test data and crunching the information they’ve already collected later this term. Once the analysis is completed Tardif-Williams will take a full-year sabbatical to write up her findings.

**Caption for attached photo:** “Child from St. David’s Public School interacts with his ‘dog buddy’ while taking part in a reading activity at the school.”

**For more info:**

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