

Therapy dogs ‘tutor’ Kroc Center kids

The Puppy Dog Tales program helps kids cope with learning anxiety

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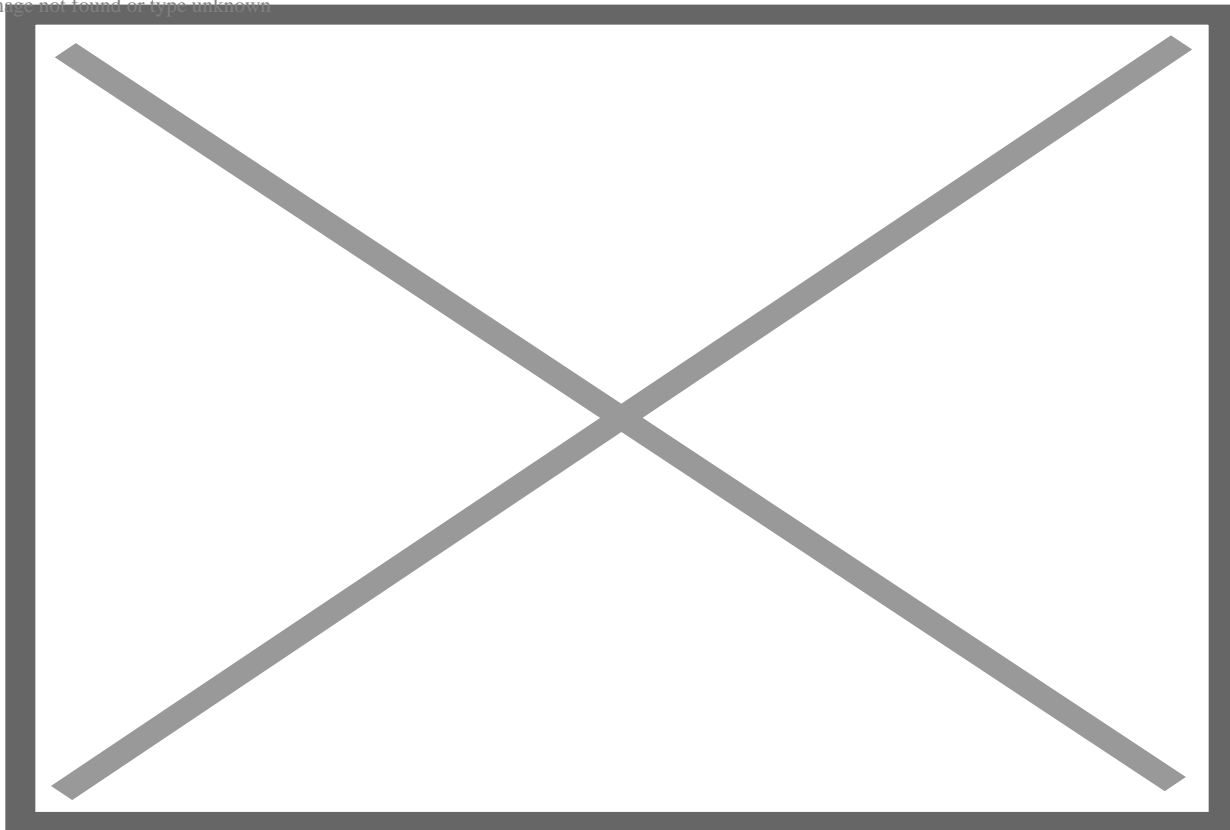
By Vivian Lopez –

Dogs can play a big part in a child’s life, offering not only their loyalty, kindness and unconditional love, but also their support in challenging times.

On Puppy Dog Tales days at The Salvation Army Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center in San Francisco, therapy dogs Jackson and India eagerly wag their tails as kids arrive at the center’s after-school program.

The dogs and their owners are volunteers for the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’ Puppy Dog Tales program, which promotes literacy and math education support to at-risk youth by sending therapy dogs to local schools, libraries and community programs to ease stress and build confidence.

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“What we’ve found is that, in general, dogs can improve attention and [presence]. People sense an unconditional love from them and a nonjudgmental presence,” said Jennifer Henley, San Francisco SPCA Animal Assisted Therapy Manager. “We really hope this program serves a cross section of our

community that could use a little additional boost.”

India and her owner, Donna Wulkan, come to the Kroc Center twice a month to provide literacy support to the kids. Wulkan works with two children at a time in 15 minute intervals and has them bring in their favorite books so they can read to the dog.

“It’s a beautiful experience for the kids to feel comfortable with the dog,” Wulkan said. “It is actually an extremely calming [time] for them. If they have any anxiety about reading, this takes [it] away.”

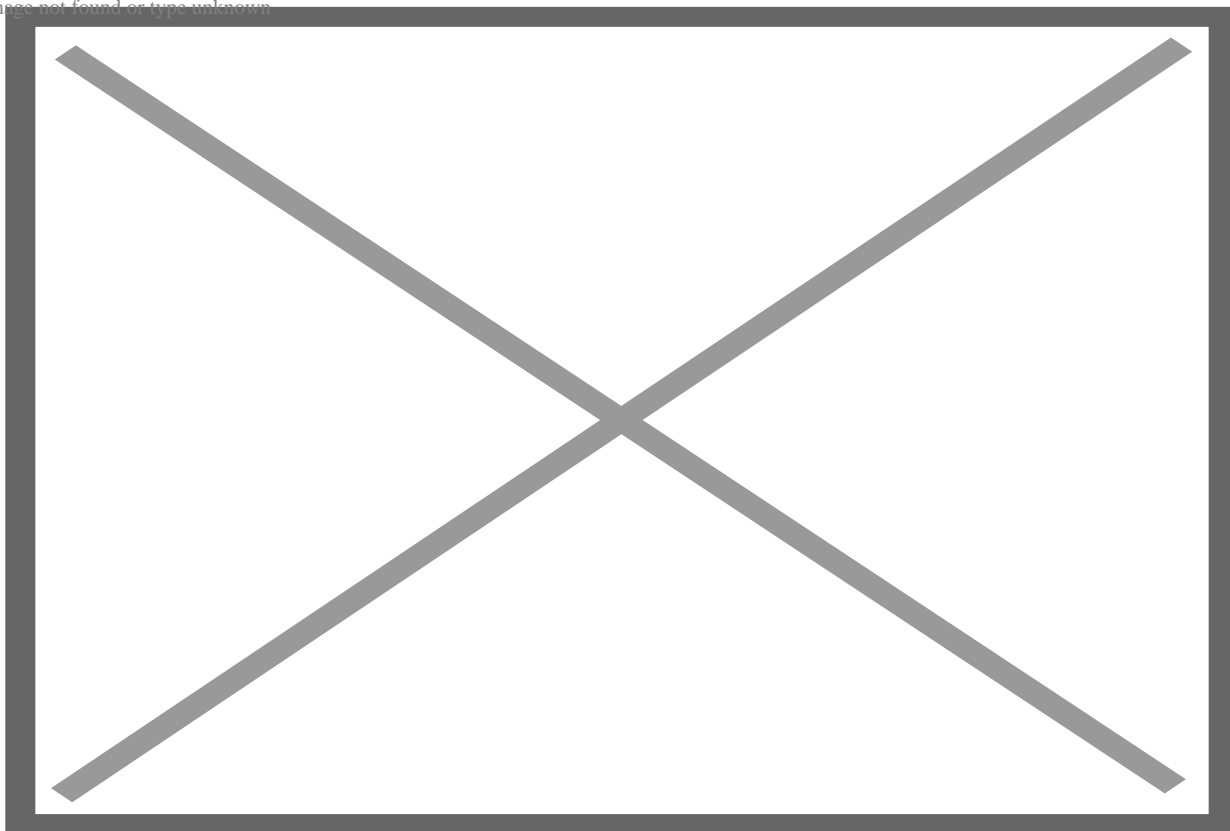
As the kids read, Wulkan observes their reading and comprehension. She said they get more confident every time.

“There’s a calming nature to it,” Wulkan said. “They’re reading to the dog...and even if they’re having trouble, there’s a sense [that] everything is OK.”

Wulkan also gives the children time to bond with India, allowing them to give her treats and water, groom her and play with her.

“The kids love her,” Wulkan said. “They all are attached to her. It’s a sweet thing on both sides.”

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Clifton Luke and his dog, Jackson, visit the kids weekly to work with them on their math homework. The children come in pairs and bring their schoolwork with them, and Luke helps them complete it by giving assistance and instruction with Jackson by their side.

“Jackson is there to hopefully reduce some of the math anxiety the kids may have or just make it more enjoyable,” Luke said. “I may ask them, ‘Can you explain this to Jackson?’ and that’s sort of my way of seeing whether their understanding has really solidified.”

Luke hopes the unique learning environment helps the kids see math in a different light.

“I know how critical it is for early positive learning experiences to be very formative in terms of kids’ interests in certain subject areas,” Luke said. “I’m hoping to be able to provide positive mathematics learning experiences to help doors open for these students.”

Jackson and India’s visits makes Xiomara De La Cruz-Garcia, 9, happy.

“I like them because they help me learn,” De La Cruz-Garcia said. “They can help you calm down.”

Nyah Kealoha-Hall, 8, agrees.

“Jackson and India help me to read better and make learning fun,” Kealoha-Hall said.

Sonja Schappert, San Francisco Kroc Center education director, hopes the Puppy Dog Tales program will have a lasting impact on the lives of the children.

“For a lot of the kids, it really helps break down any tension they may be experiencing either academically or emotionally,” Schappert said. “They let their guard down when the puppies are around...I just really hope our students can look back at this time as a really fond memory from their childhood and a really memorable learning experience.”