



[View](#) [Edit](#)

Animal-Assistance Reading Programs 'Buck' Illiteracy



By Yahaira Cespedes August 16, 2011 at 01:25PM

Do you remember your first day of school? It was the beginning of a larger world, fraught with excitement and fear. And whether you easily made new friends or were good at schoolwork (or both), it was still an overwhelming experience.

In a couple of weeks, thousands of children throughout the United States will start their first day of elementary school. And they'll restlessly await the new experience with a mixture of dread and zeal. What if, along with worrying about how they'll be received by their new peers, and if the teacher will be mean, they have to also worry about learning disadvantages, such as low literacy?

The crucial time for children to develop strong literacy skills is kindergarten through the third grade. By the fourth grade, if a child has poor reading skills, their learning retention drops drastically, sometimes irrevocably through to adulthood. [The National Institute for Literacy](#) reports that, "Adults with low literacy levels are more likely to be homeless or unemployed, or hold very low paying jobs."

There are many ways to combat low literacy in children, and one of the most successful methods has been to set up reading programs that combine the love of learning and reading with animal interaction.

Horse Program Focuses on Early Literacy Development

One such program is The Black Stallion Literacy Foundation (BSLF), which was started in 1999 by Tim Farley, Black Stallion author Walter Farley's son. One of many animal literacy programs, BSLF works by focusing on first and fourth grade children, mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds, and introducing them to horses. Cindy Carter, staff for the BSLF, says of the program, "The focus is at-risk and disadvantaged children. Some have never seen large animals before."

The BSLF curriculum and lesson plan was developed at the University of Florida. Books like *The Black Stallion* are used in the classroom, then the horse either comes to the class or the program's young participants are taken to interact with a horse at the animal's location.

If one wonders whether this kind of program is successful, well, it has expanded from Florida to other states such as Kentucky, Arizona, Louisiana, and Washington State. Kept afloat by volunteers, and private horse owners who volunteer their animals to interact with children, the program has expanded so much they're on the cusp of including other horse-related reading material and movies, and changing their name to Horse Tails Project.

But, all of this pales in comparison to the success of having a child's confidence grow, and their fears of reading aloud gone, and stir their imaginations. And get them to anticipate if they'll meet "Little Black" at the end of the program.

According to the National Institute for Literacy, "Reading aloud to children has been called the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for success in reading. Reading aloud, with children participating actively, helps children learn new words, learn more about the world, learn about written language, and see the connection between words that are spoken and words that are written."

Animal Literacy Programs for Older Children

Developing competent reading skills past the fourth grade may, in some cases, prove more difficult, but that doesn't mean an older child can't be inspired to pick up the good habit of the love of reading. One such reading program, the [Animal-Assisted Therapy Program](#) is offered through the American Humane Association (AHA).

At the Englewood library, the AHA's animal therapy program couples "beginning and reluctant readers, typically ages 5 through 12, with one of American Humane's Animal-Assisted Therapy teams." The therapy teams are comprised of one trained pet (such as a dog) and a human volunteer. The program has younger children reading at an accelerated level, as well as adolescent children who, through a longtime involvement with the program, have developed a consistent passion for the printed page. And all because these kids can read aloud without fear or reprisal or ridicule from an unconditionally loving animal companion.

There are quite a few animal literacy programs in operation throughout the country, so whether you know children who are either shy about reading aloud, or just want to spark their imagination into a lifelong habit of high literacy, nothing reinforces a positive habit more than a positive and nurturing environment.