

# THE GIFTED CHILD AS CHEETAH:

## A Unique Animal-Assisted Literacy Program



### What we can learn from a gifted second grader's experience

By Lori Friesen, Ph.D.

Although it makes sense to many people how a child who struggles with or dislikes reading and writing can be inspired and empowered when reading to a dog as a non-judgmental audience, what may be less obvious is how these experiences can benefit children who are high achievers or, as they are often labeled, “gifted” children. According to the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), gifted children “demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer).<sup>1</sup> Stephanie S. Tolan, a well-known author and highly sought after public speaker specializing in gifted children, has written extensively about gifted children’s experiences in school. She highlights the unique challenges that these children face in school through a brilliant metaphor of

the gifted child as “cheetah,” the fastest animal on earth.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I will share one child’s experience of an animal-assisted literacy program in consideration of Abigail as a “cheetah,” and illustrate how reading and writing with a dog helped to nurture her unique brilliance in an otherwise constrictive experience of school. I will then outline five benefits of animal-assisted literacy learning experiences for high-achieving children, and five suggestions for working with gifted young children within these programs.

### **Gifted Children as Cheetahs?**

As Stephanie Tolan explains, cheetahs are designed to run and are impressive in their speed. Even when they are not running, they stand out with their unique and distinctive markings. There is no mistaking a cheetah. However, certain needs must be met for a cheetah to run at top speed. They need to be healthy and need plenty of rest, they need wide spaces to run, and they need to be motivated to race, primarily through intense hunger. When these beautiful animals are caged in zoos, are sick, or are very young, they are not capable of running at top speeds.

Like cheetahs, gifted children have tremendous talents and may in fact find themselves in a small pool of elite IQs. They may stand out because of their unique and distinctive abilities and talents. And like cheetahs, a gifted child requires particular needs to be met if he or she is to be able to exercise their incredible gifts and reach their full potential. The problem is that too often schools become for gifted children what cages at zoos become for cheetahs. As articulated by Tolan, a classroom can become a 10x12 foot intellectual cage – a very limited space for a mind that requires room in which to stretch and develop the ability to run

at full speed. The question is, how might reading and writing with a dog offer gifted children unique and valuable social, emotional, and educational support?

## **Abigail as Cheetah**

Abigail is a highly competent seven year old child who is incredibly easy to love. When I first met her, her large, downcast, brown eyes barely made contact with me as she peeked up under shiny dark bangs. We sat at the back of Abigail's second grade classroom on a soft blanket. A quiet giggle escaped her lips as she sneaked glances at Tango stretched out on her little dog bed between us. I worked gently, slowly, to engage her in conversation, to ask her questions about her life and to tell her more about Tango, but I found myself becoming slightly frustrated because she gave very little in return. Quiet, sweet Abigail didn't reach out to touch Tango even once during our first 20 minutes together. I learned very little about her beyond the fact that she had two older brothers and a reddish-brown and white Cockapoo named Polly. When she left her session, she waved a small good-bye, and I found myself wondering why she had even signed up to read with me and Tango. Abigail wasn't overtly excited about being with us as the other children had been. I wondered what, if anything, she had even gotten out of the interaction. I even began to question the value of what we were doing.

Little did I know then that Abigail was a gifted child. She was one of the two top readers in her class. She wrote beautifully, with compelling description for a seven-year-old child, and her mind appeared alive and filled with brilliant ideas and vivid imagination. What could she possibly get out of these sessions reading to my dog?

Later that morning, I still wondered about this. I thought deeply and felt distracted. Then, I felt a small tug on my skirt. I pulled myself out of my thoughts and looked down, and there she was. Little Abigail, like a tiny fairy with a giant secret. She looked up at me with her huge brown eyes and squealed, her hands clenched in two small fists, almost breathless: "Oh! That was so much fun today! I can't wait until next time!" And then she was gone.

Later that morning, I talked to her teacher about Abigail. I explained that I was a little confused about our interactions and wondered if she could offer any insight about this child. She beamed. "Oh, I'm so glad that you asked. Sweet Abigail! Honestly, if you could choose, you would want an entire class of children exactly like her. She is so smart, so kind, and just such a sweetheart."

This fit well with what I had learned about her so far. But the question still burned in my mind. What could a child like this possibly get from reading with a dog? Her teacher continued. "Although you wouldn't know it at first glance, Abigail lacks confidence. She follows me everywhere at recess time, like my

little shadow. She is so far above the other children intellectually that I think she has a really hard time relating to them. She puts so much pressure on herself to be perfect, and she is such an over-achiever. It is wonderful for her to finally have an experience at school where she can just relax, have fun with reading and writing, and be herself. Thank you."

Then she showed me Abigail's writing folder. When she opened it, what unfolded in front of me was a demonstration of pure love for Tango. Abigail had filled her writing folder with creative and compelling stories, songs, and letters to my little dog, with such heart-felt expression and love that reading them brought me to tears. In one of her letters, Abigail explained how much she missed her own dog while she was at school and that Tango really helped her to feel less alone. When I interviewed Abigail several weeks later, she told me how she really liked talking to animals, that it felt easier than talking to people sometimes.

## **Five Benefits of Animal-Assisted Literacy Programs for Gifted Children**

Abigail's story offers us five key insights into how reading and writing with a dog can help to offer gifted children unique and valuable social, emotional, and educational support in the classroom.

### **1. Individualized Learning**

Too often, curriculums in schools do not offer the motivation for gifted children to work to their full potential. They are often asked to learn the same material at much the same pace as their peers, with very little consideration for

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these children’s innate need and instinct to stretch their minds. Therefore, gifted children often do only enough to succeed within the guidelines set out for them. What a waste of potential!

The individual attention that children are offered during animal-assisted literacy sessions through the focused support of the adult can offer gifted children unique opportunities to read, write, and talk about books at an accelerated level. Abigail’s writing folder is a clear demonstration of what gifted children are capable of when their brilliant minds are inspired.



cannot literally comprehend what they are saying, children have the feeling of being heard and being understood” (p. 51).<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Unconditional Acceptance and Companionship

When we think of children who don’t fit in at school, we often think of children who are on the periphery of social relationships—they are somehow different. That usually means that they might have a different color of skin, they might struggle in a subject area, or they may be of a different ethnicity than many of their peers. But children who find themselves at the top of the academic achievement scale can also feel just as alone, as they say, because it’s lonely at the top. Abigail’s experience suggests that time with Tango helped her to feel less isolated in her special brilliance.

Reading and writing with dogs can be extremely valuable for children to gain a sense of comfort and companionship, the kind of companionship Abigail sought from her teacher at recess time, and the kind of comfort she drew from being with her own dog.<sup>3</sup> As Gail Melson so eloquently writes about children’s relationships with animals, “Dialogue with [animals] offer a time-out from the anxieties of human exchange ... Despite most children’s acknowledgment that pets

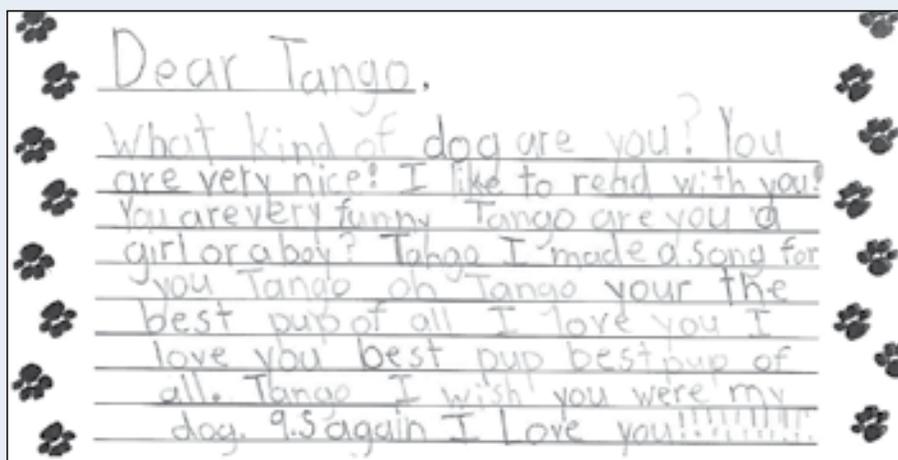
## 3. Relief from Perfectionism

In our success-driven society with a strong emphasis on individual achievement, reading with dogs can offer high-achievers like Abigail a valuable time-out from the complications and expectations of school and family life.<sup>5</sup> Research examining gifted children indicates that they can be prone to perfectionism and therefore develop very high standards for themselves. Like Abigail, this can result in low self-confidence as they can feel that they are continually under-achieving in their self-determined goals.<sup>6</sup> What Abigail sought from these animal-assisted literacy experiences was a space to be released from that pressure and to simply enjoy reading and writing. Because children understand that reading and writing with a dog carries no inherent risk and no demand to be perfect (because, quite frankly, the dog doesn’t care if she makes a mistake), gifted children can be at least temporarily released from this expectation.

## 4. Motivation for Meaningful Learning and Advocacy

Gifted children are motivated to learn and to stretch their minds when they are inspired by meaning and purpose. As was illustrated by Abigail’s beautiful stories, letters, songs, and poems to Tango, a child’s genuine interest in a topic (such as learning about dogs) can inspire long term intrinsic motivation to learn.<sup>7</sup> Further, many gifted children have increased capacities for empathy and compassion. Encouraging these children to research (under supervision, of course), how they might help animals in their own communities or neighborhoods

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can inspire creative problem solving and making a real difference in the world. For numerous ideas and stories about how children are becoming advocates for animals, check out the *MISSION: HUMANE Action Guide*, published by the Humane Society of the United States.<sup>8</sup>

### 5. Increased Communication & Risk-Taking

Although Abigail is a child who is incredibly gifted in the areas of reading and writing, she was quite shy with me in the beginning and difficult to engage in conversation during the first several weeks that we worked together. Literacy educators have long been aware of how the environment in which a child learns greatly affects how much learning can take place.<sup>9</sup> In short, children need to feel safe to be able to take risks in learning.<sup>10</sup> And the beautiful thing about a dog is that this is their natural specialty. Children perceive dogs as non-judgmental friends in the classroom; dogs can encourage positive communication between students and can calm children through their modeling of acceptance, affection, and trust.<sup>11</sup> Dogs encourage children to be more open, inspire more social contact and interaction, and help to create a shift in the atmosphere that is characterized by warmth and acceptance.<sup>12</sup>

For a gifted child like Abigail who was slow to open up and engage in conversation during our first three sessions, I observed a clear desire to communicate with me over the ten weeks as we worked together. Her motivation to learn more about Tango inspired many in-depth conversations about what Tango liked and didn't like, what she ate, what her favorite treats were, how she felt about my other dog Sparky, where she slept at night, and what she thought about coming to school (among many other topics) and were woven into her many writing projects focused on Tango. Abigail's interest in and love for Tango resulted in increased communication and risk-taking for this young gifted child.

## Five Suggestions for Working with Young Children in Animal-Assisted Literacy Programs:

**1. Understand Each Child's Unique Gifts:** Learn about specifically how this child is gifted by talking to their teacher or to their parents. Gifted children are individuals, just like other children. Being "gifted" in one area (such as mathematics, creativity, visual and performing arts, or leadership) does not mean

that this child is also gifted in other areas such as reading or writing. Ask to see examples of the child's work, if possible, that show what this child's special abilities are so you can better understand and nurture them during your time together.

### 2. Create an Atmosphere of Safety:

Gifted children need to feel comfortable in this space. As we've already discussed, many gifted children feel like they don't fit in with their peers and have great difficulty developing fulfilling friendships with children who are their own age. Therefore, it's important not to emphasize the child's giftedness (unless he or she brings it up and wants to talk about it). Remember, the dog has accepted this child just as he or she is and does not care what unique abilities or challenges they have.

### 3. Consider Creative & Purposeful Learning Opportunities:

Think beyond reading, and offer learning opportunities that will allow this child to stretch his or her abilities within this safe and accepting space. For example, engage children in meaningful discussion, research, and reading and writing activities on topics such as learning how to properly meet a new dog or learning about the unique needs of dogs. Then, you can work with the child to design a poster highlighting what they have learned to present to their classmates or to display in the school library. Individualized, purposeful activities such as this may appeal to a gifted child's heightened sense of right and wrong while also offering them the challenge they need.

**4. Let the Child Lead:** Because the school curriculum often results in a gifted child feeling "caged," this space

allows for a wonderful opportunity to ask the child, “What would you like to learn about, read with us, or write with us about today?” This flexibility and sense of spontaneity will not only offer the gifted child a welcome break in an otherwise regimented school day, but will also offer them an opportunity to exercise their intellect and superior creative thinking skills.

**5. Take Pleasure in Playfulness:** Allow yourself to relax into an atmosphere of playfulness, imagination, and fun. As previously mentioned, many gifted children feel pressure to be perfect and set unrealistically high standards for themselves, and in the process, may have a very hard time just letting go and being kids. A dog’s natural goofiness and playfulness can invite numerous opportunities for laughter and fun (as can the many hilarious children’s books and joke books written about dogs and other animals). When the dog nuzzles under the child’s arm, when he places his head in her lap, or when he wags his tail with his butt up in the air as he tries to get the child to play with him, don’t be so quick to correct this behavior. Sometimes, a little bit of play can go a long way towards a deepened relationship and an overall sense of well-being for everyone in the group.<sup>13</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

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Lori Friesen completed her Ph.D. in Education at the University of Alberta. She was awarded a SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) Doctoral Fellowship, the Isaak Walton Killam Memorial Scholarship, the University of Alberta Doctoral Prize of Distinction, and the University of Alberta Ph.D. Recruitment Scholarship for her doctoral research which explored how one class of grade 2 children experienced an animal-assisted literacy program.

Her doctoral research has been published in various peer-reviewed journals, including *Early Childhood Education* (2009), *Learning Landscapes* (2009), *Language & Literacy* (2010), *Childhood Education International* (2010; 2012), and most recently in *The International Journal of Learning* (2012).

Lori is represented by Dreisbach Literary Management and is currently writing a book titled *How Your Dog Can Help Your Child Read, Lead, and Succeed*. This book is designed to teach parents, volunteers, and educators how they can help children become stronger readers and writers, gain more confidence, and enjoy better relationships through focused interactions with dogs.

Lori lives and writes in San Diego, California. To contact Lori and to learn more about her work, visit her website at [www.lorifriesen.com](http://www.lorifriesen.com).