Getting Parents Involved

by Vickie Butts and Patty A. Finch

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ing parents involved in the educational process is a goal of most teachers. Achieving that goal is not always easy, particularly in a school without a history of parental involvement. The barriers to such involvement may be economies, language, cultural difference, or lack of communication.

Reading and Writing and Pets

Perhaps more so than in other subjects, fostering a student’s love for reading and writing is more likely to see these as a slice of life that is rewarding. As humane educators, we also are aiming toward a generation of responsible pet owners. How can we also encourage parents to model responsible pet ownership, when there may be no pets in the home?

Carole Bruce, a first-grade teacher at Webster Elementary School in Watertown, Wisconsin, has at least one answer to those questions. She is the originator of a highly successful approach to getting parents involved positively in reading, writing, and language, cultural difference, or lack of communication.

Responsible Pet Ownership

That’s just the beginning. Clifford also comes with an impressive collection of pet items donated by generous students. The collection is kept in Clifford’s own bag and includes food and water dishes, a leash, and grooming brushes. Once Clifford leaves the classroom with his temporary host, he becomes “real” in a sense for the youngster with whom he is staying. Like a real pet dog, he needs to be fed, watered, groomed, sheltered, and loved. Clifford provides parents and children with an opportunity to discuss responsible pet care, as learned about in the classroom, and to share in the care of Clifford.

Getting Parents Involved

During the school year, each of Carole Bruce’s students takes a turn caring for Clifford at home. The presence of the enduring stuffed toy dog is a “surprisingly successful motivational tool,” observes Carole. Clifford’s visits are preceded by a letter to parents asking their cooperation and help with the project. The letter explains that the children have been instructed to keep their guest brushed and clean, to provide a safe place for him, to read to him, and to keep a journal about the times the two of them share together. If the letter isn’t read, the child is sure to tell the parents about it anyway!

Parent-Child Teamwork

A visit from Clifford is a chance for parent and child to work together. He comes with a bag full of Clifford’s own books, including such titles as Clifford, the Big Red Dog, and Clifford’s Good Deeds. For some families, this is a catalyst to a new or renewed interest in reading. The parent can listen as the child reads to Clifford; and except in cases of language differences, read a story or two aloud themselves.

Clifford provides wonderful companionship and an opportunity for both parents and students to learn about pet care. In addition, youngsters who would like to have a pet of their own welcome the chance to work together. Six-year-old authors once shared that Clifford was a “symbol of a family.” Once a child has decided to bring home a pet, he is more likely to keep his or her promise.

writing and Talking

It’s apparent that students take their job as host quite seriously. A visit with Clifford inspires wonderful journal entries as well. Keeping a record of Clifford’s stay is another chance for parent and child to work together. Six-year-old authors appreciate parental assistance with punctuation and spelling. Some parents help their children by just listening to the written stories. Students want to make sure they remember to tell EVERYTHING about Clifford’s visit.

Your Own Clifford

Carole has provided here a copy of the introduction she always sends along with Clifford to each new family he visits. The toy dog that Carole uses is available from Scholastic Book Clubs, Inc., 2931 East McCarty Street, Box 750, Jefferson City, MO 65102. The ever-popular Clifford books may be ordered from your local bookseller or by writing to Scholastic Book Services at the above address.

About the Author...Vickie Butts is education director of the Humane Society of Jefferson County in Jefferson, Wisconsin.

25 CHILDREN & ANIMALS/ OCTOBER 1985