

Getting Parents Involved

by Vickie Butts and Patty A. Finch



Vickie Butts

Can Clifford make it visiting the homes of an entire classroom of first graders? Over the past years, he's done very well, thank you, and remains a real favorite with youngsters. Here, students Amber Phillips (left) and Terri Oiler (right) take time out to enjoy a playful moment with the "Big Red Dog."

Getting 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 economics, 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 cries out for parental involvement. A child who sees a mother or father reading and writing is more likely to see these activities as worthwhile.

As teachers, we are aiming not only toward a literate generation but also toward a generation that will read and write for pleasure.

In today's society in which most homes, no matter how humble, have a TV but may not have books or magazines, how can we encourage parents to model a love for

reading and writing?

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 humane education.

Her partner is a big red stuffed toy dog patterned after the popular Clifford from the stories by Norman Bridwell, published by Scholastic Books. The toy Clifford and his accompanying stories make an almost unbeatable team.

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

endearing 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 Small Red Puppy*; *Clifford, The Big Red Dog*, and *Clifford's Good Deeds*. For some families, the visit is a catalyst to a new or previously forgotten sharing of books between parent and child. The parent can listen in as the child reads to Clifford; and except in cases of language differences, read a story or two aloud themselves.

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 accompanies him wherever he visits. It 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.

"Because Clifford is a special project," explains Carole, "even the children who already have pets become more conscious of the needs of their animals. And to those children whose families do not own pets,



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Clifford, the Big Red Dog, and first-grade teacher Carole Bruce are partners in teaching. Carole holds Clifford's bag of pet care items, which include food and water dishes, a leash, grooming brushes, and Clifford's favorite books.

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

Getting parents involved in a school without a history of parental involvement is not always easy.

prove to parents how attentive they can be with a new four-legged addition to the family. "I don't know if Clifford has opened any doors for new pets," observes Carole, "but the Clifford experience offers an excellent means of seeing if a child is ready and willing to attend to all the needs of a pet."

Writing and Talking

It's apparent that students take their job as host quite seriously. A visit with youngsters in Carole's classroom brings forth many delightful comments about Clifford:

"When he was at my house, he slept with me both nights." "Yeah, but he snores." "He does not!" "I let him wear my pajamas." "My cat got jealous." "He likes Cheerios almost as much as I do."

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!

Dear Parents,
You have an addition at your house for a few days. Clifford has arrived!!! Your child has brought home Clifford, the Big Red Dog, and a book bag of Clifford's books. This will give your child an opportunity to read some books and to enjoy Clifford. Your child is to write stories about Clifford at your house. Please help your child with spelling and punctuation.
If Clifford was brought to your home on Monday, he is to be returned on Thursday morning. If he came home on Thursday, he is to be returned on Monday morning.

Rules for Clifford:

1. Have a special, safe place for him—away from pets and younger children.
2. Keep him brushed and clean.
3. Enjoy the Clifford books with your child.
4. Help your child write stories about what Clifford and he or she do together.

I hope your child enjoys Clifford while he is at your house. **AND** I hope Clifford can make it visiting homes of twenty-two first graders!!!

Sincerely,
Carole Bruce
Carole Bruce

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 7503, 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.

Why not try asking the engaging Clifford into your own classroom? You may find him to be one of the best teaching partners you've ever had! ♥

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