

The Fincher Adventure

by Rachel Reinhart, Program Manager of Hand-in-Paw, Delta Society Affiliate, Birmingham, AL



“Can he write? Can he swim?” asks Ruma, a second grader at Trace Crossings Elementary School, clearly a little

confused by the idea of *reading* with a dog.

“No, Fincher can’t write, but he does enjoy reading, especially when someone reads to him,” Judi Morris, Fincher’s handler, replies, “And he loves to swim. Fincher is a

Labrador retriever, and has special webs between his toes like a duck has on its feet to help him swim.” Judi goes on to explain that the snoozing Fincher prefers swimming in shallow puddles or wading pools to deep water. The children nod in understanding.

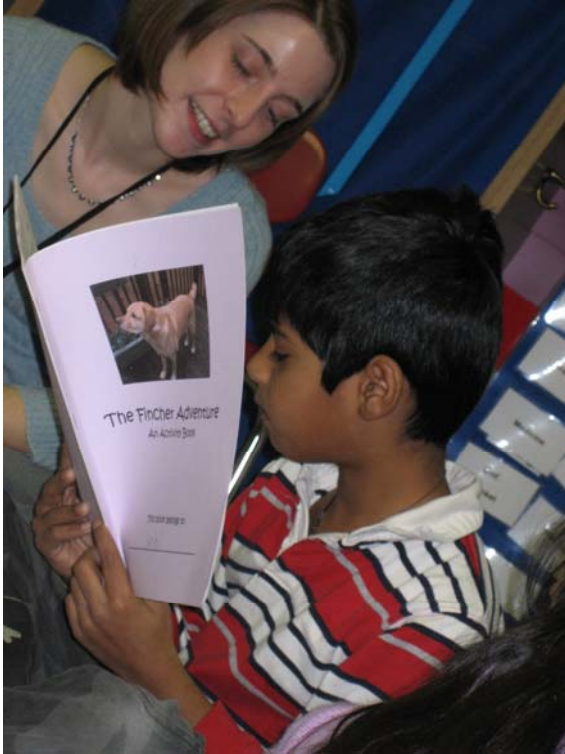
Fincher and his owner/handler Judi Morris visited second graders in English as a Second Language (ESL) class at the Hoover school in January and February. ESL Teacher Melissa Summers knew first hand that Judi and Fincher would be a hit – Judi, besides being a Pet Partner with HIP, is a Teacher’s Assistant at the Bell Center for Early Intervention, where she has successfully integrated Animal Assisted Therapy with six Pet Partner teams into the children’s daily therapeutic learning activities. She also happens to be Melissa Summers’ mom.

Creative lesson planning must run in the family. As the children gather around Fincher, petting him and delighting in his excited tail-wagging and whimpering for their attention, Ms. Summers hands out their workbooks: *The Fincher Adventure*. Together these two teachers developed a series of activities encouraging kids to learn about words and language as they learn about (and play with) a dog.

“Is that his sister?” asked Daysi, pointing to the other dog in a picture with Fincher.

“Yes, do you remember her name from your workbook?” asked Ms. Summers.

“Rosie. That’s Rosie,” Daysi replied.



“Incorporating Fincher into our lessons really motivates the children,” said Ms. Summers. “They look forward to his visits, and enjoy learning about him. They are more willing to read and write about subjects which interest them, and they are very interested in Fincher!”

And who wouldn't be? Fincher is a beautiful, friendly five-year old with wide brown eyes and a winsome grin, who has been a Pet Partner since 2002. Ms. Summers admits her prejudice – Fincher was a beloved family pet before he became a Hand-in-Paw therapy dog.

To Hand-in-Paw volunteers like Judi Morris, and to other teachers at the Bell Center, Pet Partner teams are an important part of helping children achieve their goals. “One of the first and most obvious benefits

that we have seen (at the Bell Center) while using the animals is a happier therapy experience. The therapy goals of the early intervention children are often challenging and new experiences which can be intimidating. Children working in conjunction with a dog become interested in the activities of the animal rather than the challenges they are facing. This results in enjoyment and the child becoming more relaxed and more cooperative in the therapy activity. When working on fine motor, cognitive or language skills, involving the dog lends an element of fun to the activity and provides a focal point. The children become more responsive and motivated as they work directly with the dog. Their ability to stay on task improves and they are able to practice decision-making skills,” said Ms. Morris.

Ms. Summers has great expectations for *The Fincher Adventure*. “I am hopeful that these lessons will improve their vocabulary and language skills. Improvement in these areas will help them to master the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in school,” said Ms. Summers.

Elizabeth Wheat, ESOL Specialist with The Literacy Council of Alabama, confirms the value of such lessons. “The importance of English language learning can not be overstated. Early literacy is a predictor of academic success, and for ESL students, becoming literate in English means the added challenge of learning to speak as they are also grappling with reading and writing,” said Ms. Wheat.

According to Ms. Summers, about 40 children at Trace Crossings Elementary receive services through the English as a Second Language Program. These students are a wonderfully diverse group from countries as close as Mexico and as far away as Pakistan.

“*Med-i-cine*,” one of the children sounds-out as she reads the word on a card and then scans a picture board for an image matching the word. “And I know that one, *dog treat!*”



says another, as they race to the board scrambling to attach their cards to the appropriate pictures.

While the goals of all of *The Fincher Adventure* lessons were centered on using and improving written and spoken language, each lesson had a dog-oriented theme. The first lesson introduced the children to the dog and his needs; the second taught the students about dog training and commands. In the third lesson, the children played a game in which they learned to recognize safe and dangerous animal behavior. And the last lesson taught students about safe and healthy food for dogs. At the end of their four week *Adventure*, several students were identified as candidates for ongoing reading support through Hand-in-Paw’s Sit, Stay, Read! program.

Han-in Paw hopes to continue to engage committed teachers and volunteers like Judi and Melissa in finding new and creative ways to introduce the benefits of the human-animal bond into their classrooms. Though *The Fincher Adventure* is a pilot program, Hand-in-Paw is delighted with its success and looks forward to implementing it and programs like it in other area ESL programs.