

The Story of Golden the Golden Retriever who is a Story Dog.

At the beginning of this year, a selectively mute student started coming to Story Dog. I was told this child speaks to her own family, a few staff members and children in the playground. At our first meeting I noticed that she seemed extremely anxious/embarrassed when spoken to, but she was very attentive and helpful. I established how many siblings she has, whether they are older, younger, etc, despite no words being spoken by her and nothing in writing - she did it all through her body language, such as nodding and hand gestures. I even managed to guess the name of her dog. To help her relax, for the first few weeks, I read the books she selected. Although she didn't speak she clearly understood what was being read as she demonstrated by participating with actions. After a few weeks I asked her if she wanted to read but she always shook her head.

Her teacher then told her that if she doesn't read to Golden she can't come anymore so she stopped coming for several weeks. One morning I took Golden to where she was sitting and I told her how much Golden was missing her. Right on cue gorgeous Golden flopped down beside her chair and looked at her with his adoring labrador eyes as though he was agreeing with every word I said. She clearly wanted to come, but her anxiety was all too visible. So I asked her if she would at least walk Golden to where we do the reading sessions so that he had time with her as he was missing her so much. She did this. Once there I casually grabbed a book and we sat down on the mat and Golden lay down on the mat alongside her. I began reading to her and then I said to her, "you read this sentence to Golden. I'll turn away and cover my ears with my hands and when you've read it, nudge me". I didn't hear a word, but after a while felt a prod. I turned to Golden and asked him whether she had read well. He responded beautifully by pawing me. I repeated this for the rest of the book, giving her longer passages to read. Every time I'd ask Golden and he, amazingly, responded by pawing me. Before long I could hear her fluent reading even though my hands were covering my ears. After taking Golden for another walk and giving him a piece of apple (his treat for listening to a child read) she went off beaming with happiness.

She stopped coming for a while, but when she started coming again she was comfortable reading aloud to Golden provided I kept my hands over my ears. Over time I gradually stopped covering my ears and let her know I could hear her by commenting on the passages she had read. She was then happy to read aloud to me too. All the books she selected were about dogs. Then today, my last session this term, I arrived very late. She was waiting for me and I immediately gave her Golden as he is old and ambles slowly and I went ahead to put down the rug etc. When she arrived I gave her a Story Dog book to read (about dogs) and throughout the book she kept stopping to chat to me, telling me which parts of the book relate to Golden and her dog. There was no inkling of her former anxiety and the way she chatted away to me made my eyes well up with tears. It was as though she had never not spoken to me. I actually wanted to cry and yell with joy but I just pretended that this was how it always was. At the end of our session she, as always, gave Golden his well deserved piece of apple.

When I volunteered Golden to become a Story Dog, I never anticipated how much he would enjoy this activity. He is so happy when he sees me taking the Story Dog bag and always wants to go. I never thought that Golden would respond to this girl in the way he did and always with perfect timing - "good ol' Golden is indeed a superstar Story Dog".