

DOG TALES:

Story Time in Seacrest Studios

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Dog Tales is a half-hour weekly show through Seacrest Studios that is broadcast in all the inpatient rooms, outpatient clinics and satellite campuses at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC). With one of our facility dogs (Chevy or Leica) as my primary "co-host," Dog Tales is a weekly preschool story-time with a theme. The theme is based on the season, special events, or patient interests. I include about 5 books that highlight the theme. There is a regular opening and closing song, as well as an additional song related to the theme. For example, we explored baseball last week, since Opening Day in Cincinnati had just occurred. We also sang "Take me out to the ball game" during our "7th inning stretch."

We have also used Dog Tales as the venue to introduce new facility dogs to CCHMC and to celebrate dogs' birthdays. Patients can watch, call in, co-host with me, or join us in the studio and watch the show live. The purpose of this article is to showcase a child life intervention that promotes normalization of the hospital setting and to provide an example of collaboration between Seacrest Studios and child life. It has become a unique way to broaden the reach of our facility dog interventions.

Dog Tales provides a wonderful opportunity for normalization and fun in the hospital. Patients and families watch from their rooms when not feeling well or come down to the studio for an outing: in wheelchairs, halo traction, with their medical poles, oxygen tanks or whatever they may need. If other kids/families are in the studio, there is a natural opportunity for socialization and emotional support. It is also a way for kids



in isolation to see and interact with the facility dogs. As a child life specialist, through this regular program on Seacrest, I have found opportunities to provide education, family-centered care, and sibling support. Dog Tales also combines three of my passions: reading, animals, and child life. Encouraging and supporting literacy in the hospital has always been a part of my practice as a child



life specialist. Dog Tales is a great way to provide exposure to books and to share books that facilitate and encourage emotional expression. In addition, hearing books being read aloud (in a traditional story time) helps to incite curiosity and interest in reading. After watching or participating in the show, kids earn a brand-new book. Dog Tales is especially beneficial to many of our long-term hospitalized patients with limited resources who may not have easy access to books.

Structure of the Show

Each weekly show has a theme, such as the start of the season or the holidays of various religions or cultures, including Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, Diwali, St. Patrick's Day, Cinco de Mayo, and others. I choose books based on the theme and check them out from my local library. I have an "educator card" from the library, which means I can request teacher collections, check out as many books as I want, and incur no fines. Different weekly themes and a variety of books and songs enable me to incorporate and celebrate many diverse themes and cultures. For example, to celebrate Read Across America Day, one year I read *Green Eggs and Ham* in English and another

CLS read the same book along with me, page by page in Spanish. We sometimes celebrate "author of the day" where we read only books from a featured children's book author, such as Eric Carle or Mo Willems. Once a month, I have a music therapist join me for another level of engagement for our audience. They play keyboard or guitar and bring extra instruments for the patients to play.

I also remain flexible to new ideas and events. During Fire Prevention week this past year, I invited a neighborhood firefighter to come in for an on-air interview, take questions from the audience and read one of the books I had chosen. Last year, I had a special guest host the show during National Disability Awareness month. The guest was an employee of CCHMC and had a disability that required use of a wheelchair. She was interviewed by me on the show, and we read several books that were authored by individuals with disabilities or were about individuals with disabilities.

The structure of the program is similar to a weekly preschool story time at the library. Although the program is tailored towards the preschool crowd (ages 3-6), I carefully select books that may also appeal to school-age kids. However, the dog is sometimes the main attraction, so we end up drawing in patients of many age groups. We start each show with the song "The more we get together, read together, sing together," and close with "There was a hospital (who) had a dog and Chevy was his name-O...C-H-E-V-Y)!"

At the start of each new month, I include my large interactive, perpetual preschool calendar to review the days of the week, sing our new month song and look at special dates throughout the month. We also discuss the season and the current day's weather, and call for any patient birthdays this month. Besides my opening and closing songs, we sometimes have a theme song in the middle of the several books we read that day. I also have a "story board" when I will tell a story (for example, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*) on a felt board or an ABC or counting song or rhyme. The creative possibilities are endless.

An especially enjoyable show for patients and viewers is when we have a patient or sibling guest co-host. Recently, I had an 11-year-old co-host

who helped pick the theme of the show and read several books on air. She also independently made a sock puppet to help share a story and add some commentary. I recently had 3 older siblings host and visit with Chevy while their infant sibling was a patient in the NICU. The parents were so grateful to have a break from the intensity of that situation and provide a fun opportunity for the siblings while remaining in the hospital. I have had patients host more than once, host even when they were still in the PICU, or host from their rooms, using the remote equipment that Seacrest provides. I remember one patient stated that it was “the best day of his life” after co-hosting the show with me and one of the dogs. Patients can have a recording of the show from Seacrest Studios, which they can share with friends/family when processing their hospital journey.

Not long ago, one of our hospital schoolteachers reached out to me after a long-term patient had co-hosted Dog Tales. The patient had chosen an “early reader” book about Fiona, a hippo at the Cincinnati Zoo. Fiona has a unique connection to our hospital because two of our NICU nurses helped save Fiona’s life when she was born prematurely and needed an IV to receive fluids. Fiona’s story captivated this long-term patient and sparked his interest in reading. The hospital schoolteacher was so excited that the patient

found an early reading book that was interesting to him at an ideal independent reading level. I was able to help the teacher find several more of these early readers to ensure continued reading success for this young patient.

The inpatient hospital stay can be overwhelming. Providing normalizing and educational opportunities, such as a regular story time, go a long way to providing family-centered care while relieving some stress. Having a facility dog as a partner makes the story time even more playful and entertaining. To top it off, the patient receives a facility dog trading card (and often a personal note from the dog) along with a book of their choice to add to their home library. These books are often donated to the hospital. The facility dogs can even “pawtograph” the patient’s book with their unique pawprint stamp. Broadcasting the story time on Seacrest Studios provides easy access to all patients, even those in isolation or unable to visit with the facility dogs. It is gratifying as a CLS that, through Dog Tales, we help to provide patients with some agency, when so much of the hospital experience is beyond their control.

