



CREATING CALM, CONFIDENT, CARING KIDS



Creating Calm, Confident, Caring Kids: The Mutt-i-grees® Curriculum

Children and animals have a natural affinity for one another.

Evidence shows that both derive many benefits from their interactions. The Mutt-i-grees Curriculum draws on this resiliency research, social and emotional learning and human-animal interaction to guide our program, which has two goals: enhancing children's resilience and social and emotional competence and promoting awareness of the desirability of shelter pets, referred to as Mutt-i-grees®. Our program reaches children beginning at a young age and provides opportunities for them to learn to care about themselves, other people, and animals.

The Mutt-i-grees Curriculum is a collaboration of North Shore Animal League America and Yale University's School of the 21st Century. The two organizations, one concerned with the welfare of companion animals and the other with the education and social and emotional development of children, have written a unique curriculum that supports the growth of calm, confident, and caring kids while creating a more humane future for all. The program is offered in schools, libraries, and other settings where children and families come together.



Awareness.

What Motivates Us

The Mutt-i-grees Curriculum addresses two sad realities:

- The large numbers of children who attend school each day, weighed down by negative experiences at school or at home.
- The plight of homeless pets awaiting adoption, millions of them euthanized each year in shelters that lack sufficient space.

Our Program Model

Every aspect of the Mutt-i-grees Curriculum reinforces the dual focus of our program. Children learn about shelter pets while also acquiring skills that support their ability to cope with stress, attain self-confidence and empathy, and learn to collaborate and make informed decisions. Each session includes an educational/developmental objective, with hands-on activities, books, and games focusing on shelter pets.

How Mutt-i-grees Works

We offer the Mutt-i-grees Curriculum for Pre-K through Grade 12, with continuity through all grade levels. The lessons are organized in five themes that correspond to children's social and emotional skills:

- **Achieving Awareness**
- **Finding Feelings**
- **Encouraging Empathy**
- **Cultivating Cooperation**
- **Dealing with Decisions**

One session focuses on developing resiliency. A key factor is being able to ask for help. A lesson plan titled *Who Is There?* aims to encourage children to seek help when needed. There is a lesson plan to help teachers guide group discussions on the topic. There are hands-on activities, including two worksheets: *Who Is*

There For Me? and *Who Is There For Mutt-i-gree?* The children are asked to identify and then illustrate or write about people they feel they can go to when they need help, as well as people and organizations that can help shelter dogs.

Other Mutt-i-grees Curriculum programs include:

- Mutt-i-grees in the Library, for libraries and children's programs
- The Mutt-i-grees Curriculum Guide for Animal Shelters, for shelter staff doing outreach at local schools
- Cats Are Mutt-i-grees 2
- Paws Down, Tails Up: Physical Fitness
- Mutt-i-grees At Home

Feelings. Empathy. Cooperation.



Results and Outcomes

Improved Behavior and More

A study of nearly 1,000 students compared children in classrooms using the Curriculum with comparable groups of classrooms that had not implemented the program. Researchers found that classrooms using the Curriculum exhibited significantly improved student behavior, a much more positive school climate, and greater parental involvement.

Praise from Teachers and Administrators

Mutt-i-grees teachers and principals report an improved classroom climate, a reduction in behavior problems, and fewer incidences of bullying once the Mutt-i-grees Curriculum is implemented. Teachers and librarians report an increased engagement in reading, especially books about animals and animal welfare.

Mutt-i-grees Implementation

The Curriculum is implemented in schools, afterschool programs, libraries, and other community-based organizations serving children and youth.

The Curriculum's turnkey design makes it easy to implement. Lesson plans lay out the objective and rationale for each session, and include discussion tips, materials, worksheets, and suggested books, games, and hands-on activities, and parent and community follow-up activities and handouts. Suggested advanced activities are included, to enable teachers to customize the lessons.

Live animals are not necessary for the implementation of the Curriculum. However, class visits to the local animal shelter are encouraged, and often, a therapy dog visits classrooms. Increasingly, schools are adopting dogs; they can then become registered as therapy dogs and brought to school daily. (The owner is usually a counselor or principal.)

For Pre-K through Grade 3 the Curriculum binder comes with a dog or cat hand puppet. The children often "adopt" the puppets, name them, take turns caring for them, and even invent ways to be sure everyone gets a chance to take the puppet home for the weekend.

Sustainability is a critical aspect of implementation. Although the Curriculum is limited to 25 sessions, there is continuous involvement as children and educators participate in national contests and other events we organize. For example, Mission Mutt-i-grees is a national effort that brings together schools and shelters to increase awareness of and promote shelter adoptions.

The experience transforms students.

The Mutt-i-grees Team

The Mutt-i-grees Team includes staff members from both North Shore Animal League America and Yale University. Our early focus was on the development and pilot testing of the program; we now focus on program growth, outreach, dissemination, and the provision of training and professional development.

In addition to Mutt-i-grees staff, the program also benefits from the time and talents of several educators who serve as national trainers in California, Arkansas, Missouri, Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin. These educators provide training and professional development to their colleagues and others in nearby locations.

Mutt-i-grees Team members conduct professional development and training workshops for schools, libraries, afterschool programs, and other settings using the program. They also present at school assemblies, often accompanied by dogs from Animal League America. Mutt-i-grees Team members regularly attend a wide variety of professional conferences to disseminate and help implement the program. Members have presented at conferences, participated in panels, and led information sessions across the country.

Volunteers help schools at the local level. At Animal League America, volunteers assist with social media tasks, and some have also brought their own dogs to participate in school assemblies. We are working on developing a sustained volunteer program to assist our staff members at school visits.



How We Have Grown

The Curriculum was introduced in 2010 with the publication of the Pre-K through Grade 3 binder, and its development progressed in phases. By early 2016, our Mutt-i-grees Curriculum had been implemented in more than 4,000 schools, libraries, afterschool programs, children's museums, and other organizations across the country and in Canada. Much of our growth comes from word-of-mouth.

Although the Curriculum was developed for schools and afterschool programs, it is highly adaptable to other settings. It is currently being piloted in an afterschool program at two homeless shelters in Bronx, N.Y.

About 500 libraries use the Curriculum, including one of the largest library systems in the country, the New York Public Library. Branches in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island have signed up to use Mutt-i-grees.

Mutt-i-grees is also gaining traction in colleges and universities, where participating teachers are sharing news of the program. Teacher training colleges in Kentucky involve prospective teachers in internships at Mutt-i-grees schools and also provide pre-service courses on Mutt-i-grees. In Arizona, Grand Canyon University hosts training sessions on the implementation of the Mutt-i-grees Curriculum. Starting in 2016, we began a partnership with the City University of New York's Queens College Professional and Continuing Studies Department to provide a 20-hour continuing education course titled The Mutt-i-grees Curriculum Certificate Program: Theory and Practicum for Classroom Implementation.



Effective for Special-Needs Kids

The Curriculum has proven extremely effective for special-needs students and those on the autism spectrum, providing a means for a more direct and meaningful connection to their environments. In several schools, educators provided alternative education students (with behavior and academic problems) with opportunities to work hands-on with shelter animals, feeding them, grooming them, and promoting their adoption. They report that the experience transforms students within several months; they return to regular classrooms and continue their education with classmates.

Mutt-i-grees Internships and Shelter Connections

We offer structured internships and mentorships for several local schools at the Long Island campus of North Shore Animal League America. Students in other parts of the country may participate via a virtual (video) internship, which can be used by educators to guide discussions and to plan service-learning experiences. We encourage teachers to arrange class visits to animal shelters in their communities whenever possible. We also sponsor national events to provide opportunities for schools and shelters to collaborate.

National Student Mutt-i-grees Ambassadors



In several states, middle and high school students established M.U.T.T.S Clubs. Members mentor younger students on Mutt-i-grees, assist shelter staff, advocate for better conditions for shelter pets in their communities, and reach out to others to host fundraising and promotional events. We support these activities with a national ambassadors program. Each year, educators and others may nominate students, who are then required to submit a proposal to be considered for election.

In 2014-15 inaugural Ambassadors were creative and powerful advocates for Mutt-i-grees in their schools and communities:

Ragan Fletcher, of Bixby, Oklahoma, organized a club at her school that brought hundreds of hours of volunteer work to her local shelter. In addition, she used the Curriculum as her platform as a participant in the Miss Oklahoma Pageant.

Layne Meek, of Ashland, Kentucky, galvanized a 35-member teen council of volunteers from several local schools. The group organized a wide array of activities in support of the local shelter, and also worked hands-on to help socialize pets looking for homes.

Madalyn Pennington started a school-based M.U.T.T.S. Club in Bee Branch, Arkansas. The club organizes fund raisers and public awareness campaigns for their local shelter, and made Mutt-i-grees an influential part of their community, visiting local government officials to lobby for more shelter resources, publicizing shelter issues through special events, organizing and staffing special adoption and spay/neuter events, and producing a play celebrating the charms of shelter animals. In addition, county officials credited these students with helping to lower the euthanasia rate at the county shelter by 99 percent and raising adoptions by 90 percent, during a five-year period!

