

Email: bridget@paperdragonreads.com Phone: (407) 212-7759

Family Reading Guide for "Dog Trouble"

Conversation starters for parents and children

Getting Started

What This Book Is About

"Dog Trouble" follows Ash, a city kid with a vandalism charge and slipping grades who is sent to Ferncliff Island to live with his dad and complete community service at the local animal shelter. Ash isn't a dog person—until he meets Cooper, a pointer with an irresistible personality who refuses to give up on him. What begins as punishment slowly becomes a genuine opportunity for Ash to reckon with his choices and discover who he wants to be.

Key Themes Your Child Will Encounter:

- **Accountability and consequences:** Ash's situation is the direct result of his choices—the story doesn't let him off the hook, but it also doesn't define him by his worst decisions
- **Unexpected community:** The island and shelter give Ash a new kind of belonging—one built on showing up and doing the work rather than reputation
- **The human-animal bond:** Cooper's uncomplicated acceptance of Ash becomes the catalyst for genuine change
- **Redemption through action:** The story is not about feeling sorry—it's about doing something different
- **Identity and reinvention:** Distance from his old environment gives Ash the chance to figure out who he actually is

Tip for Parents: This is a wonderful book for teens navigating consequences and wondering if they can be more than their worst decisions. Ash's story is honest about accountability without being preachy—the change he experiences is earned, not given. This makes it a powerful springboard for conversations about mistakes, growth, and second chances.

Discussion Questions

About Ash and His Journey

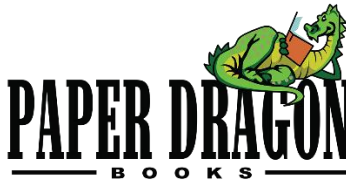
- Why do you think Ash's grades have been slipping and he's been making poor choices? What do you imagine is going on for him?
- How does Ash feel about being sent to Ferncliff Island at the start? How does that change?
- What is it about Cooper specifically that gets through to Ash when other things haven't?
- What do you think Ash learns about himself during his time on the island?

About Accountability and Belonging

- What's the difference between being punished for something and genuinely taking responsibility for it?
- Why might being removed from your usual environment help you make different choices?
- What does the shelter community offer Ash that his city life wasn't offering?
- Do you think Ash deserved the consequences he faced? Does it matter?

Fun Conversation Starters

- If you had to do community service anywhere in your town, where would you choose—and why?
- What animal would you want to work with if you volunteered at a shelter?
- Has a pet—your own or someone else's—ever helped you through a hard time?



Email: bridget@paperdragonreads.com Phone: (407) 212-7759

- If you were sent somewhere new with no reputation to protect, what would you do differently?
-

Discussion Activities

Exploring Accountability

- Discuss the difference between apologizing and actually changing—what does real accountability look like?
- Ask: "What would it take for Ash to truly make things right, not just serve his time?"
- Talk about a time you or someone you know had to face consequences—what did you learn?
- Explore: Can consequences be a gift? What would Ash say about that at the end of the book vs. the beginning?

Connecting Through Animals

- Visit a local animal shelter together and meet the animals there
 - Research what it takes to foster or adopt a dog
 - Discuss: What does it feel like when an animal trusts you? Why might that matter to a kid like Ash?
 - Talk about the responsibilities of caring for an animal and how they parallel caring for relationships
-

Conversation Tips for Parents

Navigating Consequences With Your Teen

- Approach this conversation from curiosity: "What do you think Ash was going through before all this happened?"
- Resist the urge to moralize—let the story do the work and let your teen draw the connections
- Ask: "Do you think there are adults in Ash's life who gave up on him? How would that affect you?"
- Share a time you made a poor choice and what helped you turn things around—not to lecture but to connect

Building Trust Through Responsibility

- Talk about how trust is rebuilt after it's been broken—specifically, through consistent action over time
 - Discuss: What responsibilities does your teen have that matter to someone else?
 - Explore the idea of being "needed"—how does being responsible for Cooper change Ash's relationship to himself?
-

Questions by Age Group

For Younger Readers (Ages 11–13)

- Why is Ash sent to Ferncliff Island?
- What is Cooper like, and why does he matter so much to Ash?
- How does Ash feel about dogs at the beginning versus the end of the story?
- What changes for Ash during his time on the island?

For Older Readers (Ages 13–15)

- What does the story suggest about why environment matters when we're trying to change our behavior?
- How does Ash's relationship with Cooper parallel the work he needs to do on himself?



Email: bridget@paperdragonreads.com **Phone:** (407) 212-7759

- What would have happened to Ash if he hadn't been removed from his city life?
 - What does genuine accountability look like in this story—and how is it different from just "doing your time"?
-

Activity Ideas

Writing and Reflection

- Write a journal entry from Ash's perspective on his first day at the shelter—what is he thinking?
- Write a letter from Cooper to Ash (yes, from the dog's perspective)
- Create a "before and after" character profile for Ash: same questions, very different answers
- Write the scene where Ash has to say goodbye to Cooper—what does he feel, and what does he say?

Community Connection

- Research local animal shelters and their volunteer programs for teens
 - Learn about the difference between a shelter dog and a trained service animal
 - Discuss: What community service options exist in your area? What would feel meaningful?
 - Explore restorative justice practices—how communities handle wrongdoing beyond simple punishment
-

"Dog Trouble" is a story about the particular grace of a second chance you didn't ask for and didn't think you needed. Ash doesn't change because someone lectured him. He changes because Cooper showed up every day with sloppy kisses and zero judgment, and eventually that was enough to crack him open. Let this book be an invitation to talk about the moments in your family's life when something unexpected—an animal, a place, a stranger's small kindness—changed the direction of things.