



School Therapy Dog

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Name of person responsible for this policy	Christopher Fulton
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1. Introduction

Research has shown many benefits to therapy and reading dogs in school settings. Victoria Primary School has introduced the use of a therapy dog, in conjunction with Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland, into the emotional well-being provision at school. This policy is designed to set out to pupils, parents, staff and visitors the reasons for having a school therapy dog and the rules and responsibilities to ensure the safety of pupils, staff, visitors and the school dog. Although there is a risk in bringing a dog into a school environment, this can be mitigated against with a robust risk assessment to ensure the safety of all pupils, parents, staff and visitors. (Appendix A - Risk Assessment).

Children can benefit educationally and emotionally, increase their understanding of responsibility and develop empathy and nurturing skills through contact with a dog. In addition to these benefits, children take great enjoyment from interactions with a dog.

The latest guidance from the government regarding pets and animals in school are below.

Pets and other animals in school can enhance the learning environment. However, contact with animals can pose a risk of infection including gastro-intestinal infection, fungal infections and parasites. Some people, such as pregnant women and those with a weakened immune system, are at greater risk of developing a severe infection. However, sensible measures can be taken to reduce the risk of infection to the children and to staff. Only mature and toilet trained pets should be considered and the Principal should ensure that a knowledgeable person is responsible for the animal. There should be a written agreement within the school detailing:

- ***the types of animals allowed in the school***
- ***how to manage them and permitted behaviour whilst on the premises***
- ***where they can go and where they cannot go when in the school***
- ***any insurance liability of owners and handlers***

Animals should always be supervised when in contact with the children and those handling animals advised to wash their hands immediately afterwards. Animals should have recommended treatments and immunisations, be regularly groomed (including claws trimmed) and checked for signs of infection. Bedding should be laundered regularly. The school therapy dog should not be fed in school. Meals will be provided at home.

2. The benefits of a school dog

School dogs have been proven to help develop Pupils' reading skills, improve behaviour, attendance and academic confidence, as well as increasing student understanding of responsibility and in the development of empathy and nurturing skills. At Victoria Primary School, we hope that a school dog will be a beneficial addition to our therapeutic offer in addition to the interventions we already

offer and promoting engagement for those children who have found it difficult to access talking therapies in the past.

Animal assisted interventions (also known as AAI's) can:

- Teach empathy and appropriate interpersonal skills;
- Help individuals develop social skills;
- Be soothing;
- Improve a child's ability to pick up on social cues which are imperative to human relationships;
- Therapy dogs have been shown to support emotional regulation through the positive impact on the autonomic nervous system
- Show that children working with therapy dogs have experienced improved motivation for learning, resulting in improved outcomes;

Therapy dogs are being used to support children with their social and emotional learning needs, which can also aid literacy development.

Research into the effects of therapy dogs in schools is showing a range of benefits including:

- Increase in school attendance;
- Improved confidence;
- Decreased pupil anxiety resulting in improvements in learning, such as increases in reading and writing levels;
- Improved motivation to learn;
- Enhanced relationships with peers and teachers due to experiencing trust and unconditional positive interactions with a therapy dog;
- Helping children learn how to express their feelings and enter into more trusting relationships.
- Increase social skills and self-esteem
- Teach responsibility and respect to all life

Confidence benefits

"If children are partnered with a dog to read to, for example, the dog provides comfort, encourages positive social behaviour, enhances self-esteem, motivates speech and inspires children to have fun and enjoy the non-judgemental experience"

Bark & Read – The Kennel Club (<https://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/barkandread>)

SEND benefits

"Therapy Dogs Nationwide dogs have also shown to help with special needs and autistic children and adults by giving focus and providing a calming environment."

Therapy Dogs Nationwide (<http://www.tdn.org.uk/schools/>)

Mental Health and Wellbeing benefits

Some mental health challenges and psychiatric disorders are known to respond well to therapy dogs. Patients diagnosed with a range of issues, such as depression, bi-polar disorder, Autism, ADHD, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and Alzheimer's disease, benefit from their interaction with therapy dogs and other companion animals.

Sometimes, emotional challenges are the result of physical health problems, and therapy dogs can help with those too. Research suggests that patients who are recovering from difficult surgery or a bad accident who participate in animal-assisted therapy may feel less pain. Studies have shown that such interactions can increase the mood-boosting hormone oxytocin and decrease the stress hormone cortisol.

Evidence shows that just by being near a dog when stressed can reduce anxiety. When children are more relaxed and less stressed, they're going to learn more.

Behaviour benefits

Researchers report that Pupils can identify with animals, and with empathy for the dog, can better understand how classmates may feel. It was found that violent behaviour in participating Pupils declined by 55%, and general aggression went down 62%. In a controlled study, Pupils were found to have fewer disciplinary referrals in schools with a dog than schools without. Pupils' behaviour improved toward teachers, and Pupils also showed more confidence and responsibility.

The following information has been taken from a range of sources to provide further detail about the benefits of having a dog in school:

Education

Reading programmes with dogs are doing wonders for some pupils. Children who might be embarrassed to read aloud to the class or even adults are likely to be less scared to read to a dog. "It might be less stressful for a child to read aloud to a dog than to a teacher or a peer. After all, a dog won't judge or correct you. Dogs are used to encourage struggling readers to practise reading aloud. With the presence of a calm and well-trained dog, pupils find social support and peer interaction. Dogs are incredibly calm and happy to have pupils read to them or join a group of children in the library whilst they are having a book reading session. Dogs give unconditional acceptance, as they are non-judgmental, which is especially crucial to struggling, emerging readers. The dogs also provide confidence to children as they do not make fun of them when they read, but above all they make amazing listeners, providing the children with a sense of comfort and love. Research has proved that pupils who read to dogs show an increase in reading levels, word recognition, a higher desire to read and write, and an increase in intrapersonal and interpersonal skills among the pupils they mix with.

Social Development

Dogs in school offer an opportunity for improving social development. They are especially useful for teaching pupils social skills and responsibility. Schools are using dogs to help older pupils build self-esteem; learn about positive and negative reinforcement, responsibility, and boundaries. Pupils can use dogs to help communicate, teach kindness, and empower Pupils. With a dog in school, pupils have the opportunity to learn how to care for the dog. This includes walking and grooming. Research reports that involving pupils in the daily care of a classroom dog is a positive experience, promoting their own daily care. The pupils also learn about responsibility, caring, and sharing when helping each other take care of a dog at school.

Pastoral Care

Therapy Dogs can work with pupils on a one-one basis and will especially help those pupils who have been bullied, abused, going through upsetting/difficult times or even scared/phobic of dogs. The dog will bring much joy and help to all the pupils they meet and are happy to provide plenty of hugs to the pupils they are spending time with. Pupils who struggle with social interaction can find a reassuring friend in a dog.

3. Responsibilities

Pupil Responsibilities

- Pupils whose parents have withdrawn consent are not allowed to attend dog therapy sessions.
- Pupils must always wash their hands before and after stroking and handling the dog.
- Pupils must wait until the school dog is sitting or lying down before touching or stroking her
- Pupils are not allowed to approach or disturb the dog whilst she is sleeping or eating.
- Pupils are not allowed to play roughly with the dog.
- Pupils are not allowed to eat during animal assisted therapy sessions.
- Pupils understand that any deliberate violence or threatening behaviour towards the dog will result in a fixed term exclusion.

Staff Responsibilities

- Mr Fulton will know the whereabouts of the dog and which staff are supervising at all times.
- Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland is responsible for ensuring the training and accreditation of the dog.
- The therapy dog will be kept in Mr Fulton's Office.
- The therapy dog must be kept on a lead when moving around the school.
- Pupils must never be left alone with the dog and there must be appropriate adult supervision at all times.
- Pupils will be reminded of what is appropriate behaviour around the dog before any interaction during a therapy session or visit.
- Staff, visitors and children known to have allergic reactions to dogs must not go near the therapy dog. The Office keeps a list of all pupils and staff with a reported allergy to dogs which is kept in the Therapy dog folder/box.
- If the dog is surrounded by a large number of children, the dog could become nervous and agitated. Therefore, the adult in charge of the dog must ensure that s/he monitors the situation. If the dog is displaying any warning signs such as growling or flattening of her ears, he should be immediately removed from that particular situation or environment by the trained staff member handling her.
- Any dog foul should be cleaned immediately, double bagged and disposed of appropriately by the trained dog handling staff.
- If the dog is ill he will not be allowed into school. Mr Fulton has responsibility for ensuring appropriate alternative care for the dog if the dog is not to be in school on a given day.

- Mr Fulton will maintain records and collect evidence of impact of the school dog to better inform research into the benefits of animal assisted therapy.

4. Principles

- The Principal and the Governors have agreed to the presence of a therapy dog at Victoria Primary School.
- Staff, parents and pupils will be informed in writing that a dog will be in school.
- The presence of a school dog will be made clear to visitors, via a sign, upon their arrival at the School Office and at the Staff entrance from the car park.
- Only the school dog is allowed on the premises. No other dogs are permitted. A risk assessment has been approved by the Principal. This will be reviewed bi-annually.
- The dog will be included in the fire evacuation procedure under the supervision of Mr Fulton or other trained staff members.
- The dog is covered by Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland's Working Dog Insurance and this is renewed annually.
- Only staff trained to handle the dog on school premises will have permission to do so. Whilst training this will be limited to her owner and handler, Mr Fulton and trained members of staff with prior agreement.

5. School Dog Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Q Who is the legal owner of the dog and who pays for its costs?

A The legal owner of the dog will be Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland.

Q Where is the dog from?

A The dog is a rescue from Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland.

Q Has a risk assessment been undertaken?

A Yes, a full risk assessment has been undertaken and measures put in place to reduce risk. The school has carefully considered having a dog in school and sought advice from many sources, including other schools that successfully have a school dog.

Q Who is responsible for training?

A Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland will be the legal owner of the dog and as a result, will be responsible for training. The school will be funding the dog's training towards becoming the school therapy dog.

Q How will the dog be toileted to ensure hygiene for all?

A In the interest of health and hygiene our school dog will be toileted when taken out for walks around the grounds and a designated space will be made available.

Q What if my child is scared of dogs? Will they be forced to be in the same room as the dog?

A The dog will be kept in Mr Fulton's Office and Mr Fulton will ensure the school dog only comes into contact with children who are happy to have contact with her and where there has been no refusal of permission by parents, this will be under strict supervision. A pupil will not be forced to be in contact with the dog at any time against their wishes. We hope to work closely with parents of children who are fearful of dogs to alleviate their fear and to teach them how to manage this using evidence based interventions such as graded exposure.

Q How will the dog's welfare be considered?

A The dog's welfare will be carefully monitored. The dog will be walked regularly throughout the day and given free time outside of sessions to rest and play. The dog will be carefully trained over a period of time and will have appropriate access to food, treats, water and toys.

Q How will this be managed where children have allergies?

A Children will not need to touch the dog or be in the same room as the dog at any point which will relieve the possibility of allergic reactions. We already manage a number of allergies at school and this will be no different for children and adults that are allergic to dogs. Individual needs will always be met and we are happy to work with parents to put additional control measures in place for individual allergies. She will be regularly groomed to reduce any possibility of allergens. A letter will go out to all pupils at the start of each year to ask about allergies or where parents refuse to allow their child to access the dog.