

Having a dog in school: Rationale

Introduction

Children can benefit educationally and emotionally, increase their understanding of responsibility and develop empathy and nurturing skills, through contact with a suitable, calm dog.



In addition to these benefits, children take great enjoyment from interaction with animals. By having a dog in school we want to encourage specifically those children who are vulnerable, or those who are less confident with learning, to have a friendly audience and to look forward to a challenge, seeing it as a treat, because the task is done with a dog.

Having a dog in school can encourage reluctant children to come to school. Many children list their time spent reading to, working with or caring for a dog as their favourite time in the school week and many adults have fond memories of dogs at their own primary schools.

The vast majority of dogs are gentle and loving, offering children opportunities to improve social development skills, unconditional acceptance and the chance to do something really well. For some children a dog will be a special friend, helping them to build self-esteem, relax and have fun. For others, time spent with a dog will be a reward for excellent effort with a difficult challenge.

Is there a risk in bringing a dog into a school environment?

This rationale (to be read with the Dogs on Site Policy) shows how we have thought carefully about school life with visiting dogs and pet dogs and how, through careful management, there is a very low risk of harm. Every dog entering school must have an individual risk assessment, outlining the risks posed by that specific dog and the actions taken to reduce the risk of harm. For example some dogs will be 'hypo-allergenic', posing a smaller risk to children with allergies than other dogs; different actions will need to be taken for both. Parents should be informed if a dog is visiting school and will be able to ask for their child's needs, eg, allergies, phobias to be considered and appropriate action taken. No child will have physical contact with a dog at school unless they choose to. Typically a risk assessment will include adherence to all conditions outlined below as well as additional conditions relevant to the individual dog:

1. Health & Safety Principles

Children will always wash their hands after handling the dog.

Any dog foul will be cleaned immediately and disposed of appropriately by an adult – children must never attempt to do this.

Should a bite, even playful, occur:

- Parents will be contacted immediately;
- The wound will be cleaned and covered with a sterile, non-sticky dressing;
- The child/adult will be released for medical attention;
- A full investigation into the circumstances will be led by the Head;
- The suitability of the dog will be re-assessed.

2. Pupils will:

- Always be supervised by an adult when working with the dog;
- Meet the dog individually or in a small group of children;
- Be reminded about the rules and etiquette of how to meet and approach a dog before each meeting;
- Always remain calm around the dog;
- Always be gentle;
- Avoid staring directly at the dogs' eyes as this could be interpreted as a threat;
- Keep their faces away from the dog;
- Never disturb a dog that is eating or sleeping;
- Never eat near or feed the dog;
- Only meet/work with the dog if they choose (they will be able to opt out);
- Learn about how dogs express their feeling through body language. If the dog displays any warning signs (growling, flattened ears, tail between legs, hiding) the pupil must step away and the dog will be removed immediately from the room or situation.



3. The dog will:

- Not come into school if unwell;
- Have had all appropriate health checks and vaccinations;
- Not be allowed on the school field or playground at any time;
- Not meet children during drop off and pick up times.

4. School leaders will:

- ensure that a full risk assessment is in place for each dog who has permission to be in school;
- ensure that the actions identified in the risk assessment are consistently adhered to.

Reasons to have a dog in school - some anecdotes

Julia

"I'm less aggressive, [and have] lost a lot of anger... Flare has made me open my eyes to reality and has helped me want to make friends. I'm usually very mad and upset but when I see Flare I feel relieved and there's nothing to worry about. Flare (but I call her Flare bear), she's my favourite animal. She can take me as I am and not as other people want me to be; she can listen to me when I'm upset and can make me happy by just the way she...puts her forehead right where mine is.

Byron

Byron refused to read to any parent who volunteered to help in school. He did not want anyone to know how bad his reading was and he would only read to his teacher reluctantly. When the Reading Dog arrived Byron was chosen to read to the dog (Skipper). Skipper was an amazing listener, didn't judge and really helped Byron to build his confidence. Byron's reading improved and he now designs and builds websites.

Michael

"I have become a great dog trainer, a leader and a great ambassador. I have taught people in my class how to be with a dog. In a 'Dog World' you have to be a solid leader to keep the dogs in control. It is always great to help out with the dogs!"

Jordan

"Bullying is a growing problem that kids feel they can't do anything about. No-one can help them. They say tell a teacher but it doesn't help. It's a terrible experience, no-one can help you".

What happens to students who are bullied is not easy to counteract. Often they feel that they don't matter – to anyone at school – and are completely unmotivated to continue their education. Without the self-confidence to stand up to those who are tormenting them, school is not a place of refuge.

"Buddy accepted me. I was really good at working with him and my trainer said I had natural talent. I felt like I was doing important work taking care of Buddy. I was part of a team and I had a friend I could talk to."

