

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 students' understanding of responsibility and in the development of empathy and nurturing skills. At West Park Academy, 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 increased 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."

Frequently asked Questions

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

A The legal owner of the dog will be Miss Parker. She will bear the costs associated with buying the dog and owning the dog at home; the school budget will support any training costs and insurance. There is a school dog contract in place which identifies and sets out all therapy dog related costs. The school's public liability insurance covers a school therapy dog as long as stringent measures are in place including a robust risk assessment, the parental choice of accessing the dog for their child/children, a responsible owner trained alongside the dog and appropriate pet insurance.

Q Has a risk assessment been undertaken?

A Yes, we have carefully considered having a dog in school and sought advice from many sources, including other schools that successfully have a school dog. We also have had other staff who have brought their dogs into school on previous occasions for which a risk assessment was also completed.

Q Who is responsible for training?

A Miss Parker will be the legal owner of the dog and as a result, will be responsible for her training, school will be funding the dog's training towards becoming the school therapy dog. Appropriate professional training will be obtained and the dog will work towards being trained as a therapy dog with a 1:1 trainer with advice from certified trainers.

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 outside of the school grounds. She will, of course, be fully cleaned up after.

Q Will the dog be a distraction to pupils' learning?

A The dog will be kept in Miss Parker's office. To enable the dog to have more space to roam when she is not working, she also has access to the Head Teachers office, front of school office, all who will support Miss Parker in caring for the school dog. The dog will also attend meetings with staff to support further socialisation, and support staff well-being, following consultation with staff beforehand.

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

A School staff 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 have access to child free zones. 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. An initial letter of consent will be sent out then a letter will go out to all new pupils at the start of each year to ask about allergies or where parents refuse to allow their child to access the dog.