

Background

Numerous research studies have shown the benefits of therapy dogs in schools. Therapy dogs have been working in schools for the past 5 years in the UK, but have been commonplace in schools across Australia and the USA for many years now.

Evidence indicates that benefits include:

- * Cognitive – companionship with a dog stimulates memory, problem-solving and game-playing
- * Social – a dog provides a positive mutual topic for discussion, encourages responsibility, wellbeing and focused interaction with others
- * Emotional – a school dog improves self-esteem, acceptance from others and lifts mood, often provoking laughter and fun. Dogs can also teach compassion and respect for other living things as well as relieving anxiety.
- * Physical – interaction with a furry friend reduces blood pressure, provides tactile stimulation, assists with pain management, gives motivation to move, walk and stimulates the senses
- * Environmental – a dog in a school increases the sense of a family environment, with all of the above benefits continuing long after the school day is over.

Empirical evidence has shown that therapy dogs can enhance children's psychological development, improve social skills, and increase self-esteem among other benefits. Dogs in schools can be used to calm fears, relieve anxiety, and teach skills. In particular, school dogs are used to listen to children read. Reading to dogs has been proven to help children develop literacy skills and build confidence, through both the calming effect the dog's presence has on children, as well as the fact that a dog will listen to children read without being judgemental or critical. This comforting environment helps to nurture children's enthusiasm for reading and provides them with the confidence to read aloud.

It is recognised that animals are not generally allowed in either the school building or grounds, unless a full risk assessment has been undertaken, that takes into account the behaviour and characteristics of the animal(s). This is the reason why dogs belonging to parents and carers are not allowed on the school site. A full risk assessment has however

been undertaken for the Educational Assistance Dog in training (Emmet). This will be reviewed annually as the training progresses.

It is accepted that interacting with a dog may not be appropriate for all children, but that for the majority it has the potential to provide many positive benefits. Any parent or carer who does not wish their child to interact with Emmet, will be asked to inform Mrs McSweeney of their wishes. She will then ensure that this is taken into account and that these children do not have any contact with Emmet at any time. A list of these children will be kept in the school office.

Emmet will:

- Be owned by Mrs McSweeney and her family.
- Be introduced to school as a puppy and will 'grow' up in school.
- Be based in Mrs McSweeney and Mrs Lee's office, where he will have access to all necessary amenities to ensure his comfort and well-being.
- Always be kept on a lead when moving around school.
- Use the neighbouring park for toileting.
- Costs associated with him, including veterinary costs will be covered by Mrs McSweeney.
- Visitors and pupils will be informed of a dog on site.
- Parents and carers will be asked before their child(ren) has contact with Emmet. A list of children who do not wish to interact with him will be kept in the school office.

The role of the Educational Assistance Dog in training (Emmet)

- ✓ Emmet will be socialised by Mrs McSweeney and will learn basic cues through positive reinforcement training.
- ✓ Mrs McSweeney will run educational assemblies for all children during which she will teach them how to interact with Emmet and dogs in general. This will extend to teaching the children how to 'read' the body language of dogs and the golden rules to apply when meeting dogs.
- ✓ Emmet will take part in a 3 year training programme to become a fully certified educational assistance dog with the only organisation in the country, who currently offer a fully comprehensive and rigorous training and assessment programme – DHK (Dogs Helping Kids). In the first few months, he will benefit from training carried out by DHK.
- ✓ Once Emmet has been assessed by DHK as having successfully met their standards (at approximately 10-12 months), Permission from parents and carers will be sought to allow children supervised contact with Emmet as he continues his training.
- ✓ Mrs McSweeney may run a lunch/breaktime club where a group of children will be allowed to walk with her and Emmet. She would ensure that all children who would like to do this are given a 'fair' opportunity to do so.

- ✓ Representatives from DHK will undertake a welfare assessment of the school environment to ensure that it meets their high expectations.
- ✓ As training continues, Emmet will undertake further assessments at increasing difficulty.
- ✓ Emmet will begin interactive work with pupils, listening to readers etc.
- ✓ Eventually, Emmet will hopefully become a certified Dogs Helping Kids Educational Assistance Dog!

Requirements

It will be a requirement that Emmet:

- Is regularly groomed and checked for signs of infection or other illness
- Is diagnosed and treated by a vet if he is ill
- Receives regular vaccinations as required
- Is wormed at the interval recommended by his vet
- Has his claws trimmed to reduce the risk of scratches

It will be a requirement of the handler/owner to ensure that:

- Emmet is physically fit before visiting the school environment
- Emmet is kept on a lead when moving through the school or school ground during school hours. He may be taken off the lead whilst in Mrs McSweeney and Mrs Lee's office and during direct training with the handler
- They remain with the Emmet at all times when he is not in his crate
- Emmet is discouraged from jumping, scratching and licking
- Emmet is of an acceptable hygienic standard, i.e. not muddy, wet etc.
- Natural relief for Emmet is taken in the designated area only. Waste will be disposed of by the handler, in bags deposited in a designated bin

Pupils will:

- Never have sole responsibility for, or be left alone with Emmet
- Be reminded of what is appropriate behaviour around Emmet as part of an education programme run by Mrs McSweeney. Appropriate behaviours are:
 - Always remain calm around Emmet
 - Don't make sudden movements and be gentle
 - Always approach Emmet standing up
 - Do not approach Emmet when he is sleeping or eating
 - Don't put their face near Emmet
 - Don't stare into the Emmet's eyes as this can be interpreted as a threat
 - Do not eat close to Emmet and never feed him
- Learn about how dogs express their feelings through their body language
- Be informed of the following health and safety principles:
 - Always wash their hands and/or use anti-bac gel after handling Emmet

- Any dog 'mess' will be cleaned up immediately by Mrs McSweeney or another adult. This must never be done by children.

Should a bite (even playful) ever occur:

1. Parents or carers will be contacted immediately
2. The wound will be cleaned and covered with a sterile, non-sticky dressing
3. The child/adult will be released for medical attention
4. All staff will be informed
5. Emmet will be removed from direct contact with any child pending the outcome of the full investigation and reassessment
6. A full investigation into the circumstances will be led by the Headteacher
7. The suitability of Emmet will be re-assessed by the Headteacher, Governing Body and if appropriate, dog behaviourist Tracey Berridge from the Dogs Helping Kids charity, to which Emmet will be working towards accreditation with.