

Holy Trinity National School

School Wellbeing Dog Policy

Introduction:

This policy is the product of whole-staff collaboration in tandem with the Board of Management of the school. It was formulated in January, 2020 and ratified by the Board of Management on 22nd January, 2020.

Rationale:

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 interaction with a dog.

School Policy – also see **Appendix 3 – Risk Assessment Document**

- Only the school wellbeing dog is allowed on the premises. No other dogs must come on site.
- Parents and guardians are asked contact the school to discuss their child's allergies, fears etc. in relation to the wellbeing dog.
- Parents/guardians may contact the school if they do not wish their child to have access to the dog.
- The breed of dog chosen has been carefully considered to ensure that it is an intelligent breed that responds well to training, which is known to be good with children and is very sociable and friendly.
- Staff, parents and pupils will be informed by letter that a dog will be in school.
- A full risk assessment has been undertaken and this will be reviewed after 6 months and thereafter will be reviewed annually.
- If the dog is ill, she will not be allowed into school.
- The dog will be kept on a lead when moving around the school, in the school grounds, between classrooms or on a walk and will be under the full control and supervision of an adult.
- Children will never be left alone with the dog and there will be appropriate adult supervision at all times.
- Staff working with the dog shall ensure that children are reminded of appropriate behaviour around the dog.
- Staff working with the dog shall ensure that children are aware of the behavioural signs from the dog.
- Any dog foul will be cleaned immediately and disposed of appropriately by the supervising adult using gloves and suitable bags.
- Appropriately trained staff will maintain records and anecdotal evidence of the work and impact of the school dog.
- The school's insurance policy will cover the dog while she is working in the school.

Actions

If a parent/child/staff member reports having an issue with the dog, this information must be passed to the Principal or the Deputy Principal as soon as possible. All concerns will be responded to by the Principal. Parents/guardians may contact the school at any stage if they do not wish their child to have access to the wellbeing dog in school.

Roles and Responsibilities

- The Board of Management has a responsibility to ensure that the school has a written policy for dogs in School.
- The Principal is responsible for implementing this policy.
- Teachers, staff, pupils, parents/guardians and visitors are required to abide by this policy.
- The person responsible for the dog is Ms. Sara McGeachy.
- The curriculum will support learning about dogs and how best to behave around the school dog. This will include highlighting that not all dogs are well trained and that caution must be used around unknown dogs outside school.

What are the benefits of having a school dog?

Numerous research studies have shown the benefits of wellbeing/therapy dogs in schools. Wellbeing/Therapy dogs have been working in schools for the past 5 years across Ireland and the UK. However, they have been commonplace in schools in the USA and Australia for many years.

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.
- Reading – 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.

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

Behaviour:

In some schools, dogs are making a difference in the behaviour of pupils. Researchers report that pupils can identify with animals, and with empathy for the dog, can better understand how classmates may feel. Behaviour problems occur in school and these can interfere with teaching and learning. Some schools are using dogs to improve behaviour problems by promoting positive behaviour in pupils and allowing pupils access to the wellbeing dog as a reward or to promote improved behavioural outcomes.

Attendance:

Some schools report that attendance improves as a result of the school having a School Wellbeing Dog.

Education:

Reading programmes with dogs are doing wonders for some students. 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," students find social support and peer interaction.

Dogs are incredibly calm and happy to have student 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 students who read to dogs show an increase in reading levels, word recognition, a higher desire to read and write, and an increase in intra and interpersonal skills among the students 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. Specifically, schools are using dogs to help pupils build self-esteem; learn about positive and negative reinforcement, responsibility, and boundaries. With a dog in school, pupils have the opportunity to learn how to care for the animal. This includes walking and grooming. Researchers report that involving pupils in the daily care of wellbeing dogs 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.

Students who struggle with social interaction can find a reassuring friend in a dog.

As a reward:

The wellbeing dog will be gentle and loving, but at the same time full of fun and enjoyment for pupils. Those pupils who have performed incredibly well during the week or those who have made progress in a certain subject, or those who have achieved tasks set for them, may be rewarded with spending time interacting with the dog under the supervision of an adult. Walking, grooming, playing and training are some of the activities that pupils may be allowed to undertake. It has been proven that working and playing with a dog improves children's social skills and self-esteem.

Appendix 2 **School Dog Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

Q Will the dog be a distraction?

A The dog should not be a distraction. It will be a working dog in school, there to promote the wellbeing of the entire school community as outlined in Appendix 1.

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

A In conjunction with the school's insurer, a thorough risk assessment has been carried out and this is included in this document as Appendix 3.

Dogs are not allowed anywhere on the school site at any time unless specifically authorised by the Board of Management. This includes drop off and collection times. This policy outlines measures put in place to allow the School Wellbeing Dog to be present.

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 and a reputable dog behaviourist. It is attached to this policy as Appendix 3.

Q Has the dog been trained ?

Yes, the dog will be fully trained.

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 short walks in the grounds. Only staff members will clear this away appropriately leaving no trace on the ground, cleaning the area with disinfectant if needed.

Our policy of no dogs in the playground is still applicable as we are unable to put effective control measures in place that guarantee temperament and safety when children come into unsupervised contact with unknown dogs.

Q How will the dog's welfare be considered?

A The dog will be walked regularly and given free time outside. The dog will have unlimited access to water and be fed regularly. She will have a designated house inside the school, at present in 2nd class and the school and the teacher responsible will ensure that this space is warm and comfortable for the dog. We will work carefully to ensure the dog's welfare is always considered.

Q How will this be managed where children have allergies?

A Children will not need to touch the dog, 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. The dog is given a high quality food and regularly groomed to reduce any possibility of allergens.

Q My child is frightened of dogs; how will you manage this?

A Access to the dog is carefully managed and supervised and children do not need to have close contact with the dog if they do not wish to. 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. Parents/guardians are requested to contact the school office to discuss any allergies, fears etc.. that may concern them or their child/children.

Success Criteria:

- Feedback from pupils and parents/guardians
- Records and/or anecdotal evidence of the work and impact of the school dog
- Feedback from staff members

Review:

This policy was initiated in January, 2020 and will be reviewed in June 2020 and annually thereafter.

Signed: _____ Chairperson Date: _____