



School Therapy Dog Policy--2024

PURPOSE

The aim of this project is to improve wellbeing and engagement across the school with the assistance of a school therapy dog. The program will continue to be implemented and expanded in 2024. The objectives of this project are to improve engagement and connection with school and to support the emotional wellbeing of students, staff and parents.

SCOPE

This is a program in place to directly support Staff and Student Wellbeing. This policy governs the program, ensuring the successful implementation of the program. Empirical evidence has shown that therapy dogs can enhance children's psychological development, improve social skills, and increase self-esteem. Dogs can also teach responsibility, compassion, and respect for other living things. Dogs in the classroom can be used to calm fears, relieve anxiety, and compliment the THRIVE actions.

Research has demonstrated that therapy dogs in the school setting can not only make a measurable difference in terms of gaining skills such as reading enhancement, but also in contributing critically to emotional and relational development. School counsellors are finding that the presence of a therapy dog decreases anxiety and enables students to work through issues such as anger management, bullying tendencies and other psycho/social problems. The introduction of a non-threatening therapy dog can serve as a catalytic vehicle for forming adaptive and satisfactory social interactions. Guided activities and group discussions help teach students how to handle interpersonal conflicts and develop constructive responses.

DEFINITIONS

- A 'therapy dog' is a dog that has been suitably trained to provide animal-assisted wellbeing programs under the control of his/her handler/s.
- A 'handler' is a nominated volunteer/s in the school who is/are responsible and in control of a therapy dog while on school grounds and when facilitating the animal wellbeing program.

CONTEXT

- The dog is owned by primary handler - Melissa Hamilton
- Dog is a purebred Golden Retriever
- Dog will always be with one of the handlers
- Dog will be based in the senior art room, a Principals Office, staff room or in the front office and will have a designated safe space for the dog
- Dog will have time in the art room, yard and some classrooms –always with a designated handler
- Students will be educated in appropriate behaviour around the dog and develop increased responsibility with handling and managing the dog

- Activities Therapy Dog may be involved in include: sitting in their safe space watching classes, sitting with handler/s and allowing Dog to be patted, wandering around classrooms when class and Dog show clear evidence of appropriate expected behaviours, walking through internal building off lead (with handler beside them) to lead classes to other rooms, walking around school grounds with a handler for patting, core element of lunchtime program/storytelling
- Visitors to school will be informed of the dog at the school reception, explaining the Dog's role and requirements
- This policy covers all aspects of having a dog in a school environment; careful management abiding by this policy ensures there is a very low risk of harm to students, staff, visitors and the dog.

POLICY

Bella is a purebred golden retriever. Bella and her primary handlers (Mrs Hamilton and Ms Haddow) have been trained by Lead The Way to undertake the therapy dog program at Langwarrin Park Primary School. Therapy dogs can help refocus students who may be feeling upset or anxious for a variety of reasons. The handlers are members of 'The Dog Squad' (Frankston Family Life), which is a network program. They meet at a nominated school each term to discuss.

Bella has been thoroughly temperament tested and exposed to a range of experiences such as animals, wheelchairs, ramps, traffic, schools (both familiar and unfamiliar) and other dogs. Throughout the testing she has shown very low arousal, suggesting a highly appropriate temperament for work as a Therapy Dog.

Daily management.

The Dog:

- will only be at school if she is well
- will be kept on lead at all times whilst on outside duty at school
- will be under the supervision of trained handlers or delegate at all times
- will be up to date with all vaccinations, worming and grooming
- will not be taken off the site, unless with the Primary Handler/s
- will have a safe area in the art room and a Principal's office (designated zones)
- will wear training vest/THRIVE bandana to ensure she is recognised as a therapy support dog

Student expectations

Students:

- will never have sole responsibility for the dog or be left unsupervised around the dog
- will be reminded of appropriate behaviours around the dog with each contact
- will learn to recognise the dog's body language and how to react
- will always be reminded to respect the dog and remain calm around her at all times
- will be gentle and not make sudden movements or attempts to physically contact the dog
- will not stare into the dog's eyes and be given knowledge as to why not
- will request permission before touching the dog
- will keep their face away from the dog

- will always approach the dog in a calm, slow manner and not touch the dog until it is sitting and calm
- will not disturb the dog while off duty in the safe zone/crate
- will never feed the dog
- will continue beneficial learning into the dog's development
- will ensure that no more than 3 students will approach the dog at once
- Demonstrate collaboration of the dog's role with the whole school community, including; staff, parents, students, family members

Health and Safety

- All persons should always wash their hands/sanitise after handling the dog
- Any dog excrement to be cleaned and disposed of appropriately by handlers
- Only Assistance Dogs (eg Seeing Eye, Hearing, etc) allowed on school premises unless other arrangements made with the school Principal
- Contact with Bella is optional and any students, staff or school visitors who are allergic to dogs do not have to have contact with Bella.
- The handler/s will ensure that the therapy dog does not pose a health and safety risk to any student, employee, or other person at school and that the dog is brought to school only when properly groomed, bathed, free of illness or injury and of the temperament appropriate for working with the school community.
- In the event the school is made aware that the dog triggers a student's health condition (for example, allergies or asthma), the school will notify the student's parent/carer(s) and ensure appropriate steps are implemented to minimise health risks.
- Staff, students and visitors are requested to notify the school of any health or safety concerns about the therapy dog. We are committed to consulting with students and parent(s)/carer(s) in relation to any such health or safety concerns so that appropriate arrangements can be made on a case-by-case basis.

If Dog is hurt or injured (accident or by student)

- Dog will be removed by handler calmly from the situation, if required
- Dog to be moved to her safe area
- Handler to take Dog to the Vet if required
- Parents informed if harm caused by student and Progression of Consequences followed.

Incident protocols

- Parents to be notified immediately
- Seek medical attention if required
- Inform relevant staff
- A full investigation from Principal and handlers

Resolution of personalities protocol

- Safe comfort buffer zone perimeter provided between the dog and the other party of 3 meters

FURTHER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Lead the Way : <https://leadtheway.com.au/>

School Therapy Dogs <http://www.schooltherapydogs.org/>

Dogs in the classroom <http://www.creativeteachingsite.com/dogs/dogs.html>

THERAPY DOG PROTOCOLS

1. The therapy dog and the handlers will be trained .The handlers will be the people working with the dog and the children at all times. The dog will have signage as in a vest or a THRIVE bandana to indicate that it is working.
2. The school community will be notified that a therapy dog is coming on site and what the program looks like for each term.
3. The dog will have a safe space in both the senior art room (with handler 1) and the AP office (with handler 2)
4. The dog will be familiarised with the school setting when students are not on site. The dog will have training about safe spaces, enter/exit doors, food/water provision and toileting procedures/areas. The dog will have specified toileting areas where students do not play (eg garden areas)
5. The target group of students will be familiarised with appropriate behaviour and protocols before the dog comes on site. This will include the dog's safe area, how to meet and greet, acceptable noise levels within the room and tones/commands the handlers may use. All interaction and degree of contact will be voluntary. The supervision of the dog is high at all times.
6. All parents/guardians must provide informed consent for their child/ren to interact with a visiting therapy dog. This means that they understand both the *benefits* and the *risks* associated with their involvement. These can be opt in/opt out consent forms. Opt out is only acceptable where the team is a permanent and ongoing presence within a known setting (eg school) and the presence of the animal is an accepted part of being involved with that setting.

REVIEW CYCLE

Reviewed in Feb 2024

Approved in Apr 2024