



## **The Dogs Trust guide to the use of school dogs**

### **Our ethos**

At Dogs Trust, we understand the special bond and connection between dogs and their families. Our intention is to nurture and harness a loving relationship, where both dogs and families are helped and supported by us.

The human-dog bond can change lives, making each day happier and more complete, and we want to offer information and insights that allow that bond to be achieved to its fullest potential, and for those wonderful benefits to be enjoyed by all.

### **The aim of this guide**

This comprehensive guide aims to facilitate that relationship within a school environment, so that all parties involved feel relaxed and safe. We have offered suggestions around many important factors for consideration and are pleased to also offer a free of charge, 1:1 video call to further discuss any points below in more detail. We have also signposted and linked additional resources throughout that we recommend exploring.

### **School Dogs definition**

For the purpose of this guide, we would define a school dog as a dog that is resident within the school each day, for the majority if not the whole of the school day. They are a dog that spends the majority of their time in the classroom or elsewhere in the school environment, on a consistent, ongoing basis. We are not referring here to occasional visiting dogs, who are only present for a short period of time.

### **Our stance on school dogs**

We recognise that incorporating a dog into a school or educational setting is a trend that has grown in popularity within the UK in recent years. We receive many enquiries around this and are often asked for advice about how best to manage the integration of a school dog.

There are many important factors to consider before deciding to proceed with getting a school dog. Whilst we aim to offer helpful and supportive guidance, we would also like to be clear and transparent about Dogs Trust's position on this issue. We would like to highlight the many elements for consideration that lead us, the UK's leading canine welfare charity, to conclude that this is an inadvisable initiative. The information below offers key details and references to support our position on this:

There is evidence to suggest that using dogs for Animal Assisted Intervention – such as dogs in schools - can lead to compromised welfare in the individual (*Arhant et al, 2016*). As the leading canine welfare charity in the UK, Dogs Trust **recommends** that meeting the dog's physical and emotional needs are prioritised by any party wishing to use a dog for such a purpose.

Having a dog in a school environment may be beneficial for the children and staff, and we duly acknowledge any supporting research around this, as well as any other reasons and motivations. This experience needs to be equally enjoyable for the dog, however, and there remains a considerable lack of research that explores this. It is not sufficient, from an ethical point of view, for an animal which is used in education simply to tolerate it; they need to actively enjoy it, and this is unlikely to be achievable in a school environment for the majority of dogs, based on our comprehensive understanding of our canine friends.

Our UK-wide Education team has spent the past 15 years visiting thousands of schools and learners throughout the UK, are certified teachers, and are acutely familiar with the school environment. It can be a very busy, noisy and unpredictable place and therefore likely very stressful for the majority of dogs. Studies show that environmental and social stress lead to increased irritability in dogs, and that a dog bite is most likely to occur as a result of anxiety in the individual (*Arhant et al, 2016*).

We would therefore strongly advise against introducing a dog to a school environment, but where a school dog may already be in place, or a decision is made to still proceed, we would like to encourage due consideration to the many important factors we have highlighted throughout this guide.

### **The owner's responsibility and commitment**

It is important to remember that a school dog **does not** belong to a school; they belong to an owner with whom they form an important bond and live as part of the family. We are sure that every measure would be taken to meet a school dog's needs when present within the school environment, but we would urge due consideration to be given to whether that can be achieved whilst also managing a busy job role.

Many dogs live for 12 -15 years; any owner getting a dog, whether as a pet or a school dog, must consider very carefully whether they can commit to caring for the dog for their entire life. In the case of a school dog, it is important to consider the implications of the owner changing jobs, when taking the dog to school/place of work in their new post might not be an option.

It is vital for the owner to have alternative dog care plans in place **before** committing to taking their dog into school each day. A dog's experience, emotions, and moods may change from moment to moment, just as ours can, so alternative care must always be an option. Even if a dog has seemed relaxed and comfortable during the morning period, they might not feel the same way about being in the school environment in the afternoon, or the following day. In these instances, it wouldn't be

fair for the dog to remain in the school environment, so alternative care is essential in case it is needed. Furthermore, it is also possible for dogs to develop medical conditions that might make their attendance at school difficult or even impossible. They may also slowly become less tolerant of the noise and activity of a school environment over time, so changes to any school dog's needs/emotions/behaviours need to be constantly considered, closely monitored and acted upon.

The owner will also need to ensure that alternative arrangements are in place for the care of the dog on occasions when the dog is unable to go into school; for example, if the dog is unwell or classroom temperatures rise above a comfortable level for the dog (dogs are not able to regulate their body temperature as effectively as humans). The same is true if the dog becomes unwell whilst at school or needs to be removed from the school environment for any reason.

For dog welfare and pupil safety it is imperative that any dog in a school environment be supervised by the **owner at all times**. As noted above, the school environment has the potential to be challenging for the dog; the owner, who knows the dog best, must ensure that as soon as the dog is indicating (through signs which might be either subtle, such as looking away, lip licking, or yawning out of context, or more overt, such as baring teeth and growling) that they need to be removed from a situation, this can be actioned quickly and safely. This responsibility should not be passed, even temporarily, to someone else.

It is essential that the dog's owner (and ideally the whole school community) is well-versed in canine communication and can quickly and easily identify the range of subtle signals that dogs display to indicate stress, worry, or frustration, as per the examples outlined in the previous point. A comprehensive understanding of dog communication is critical to ensure both the dog's wellbeing and pupil/staff safety.

Different dogs may choose different signals to display worry or frustration (amongst other emotions), and the same dog may even pick different options each time. There is not always an obvious increase in worry (as an example emotion) through the communication the dog offers, and a dog may jump from offering more subtle signs, such as those mentioned in the previous point, to more overt signs that can then often precede a bite (subtle signs can also precede a bite, however), such as growling or snarling. Depending on the situation the dog is in, and other factors affecting their emotional state that day and in that moment, there may even be times where a subtle sign is initially offered, but missed by those observing, and the dog then escalates to biting quicker than they may have on a different occasion. Every dog is an individual and like humans their behaviour can change throughout their lifetime through learning that different types of communication from them illicit different responses from the humans around them. For example, a dog who may have tried to growl to communicate increasing discomfort within a situation on one occasion may next time choose to bite if growling did not result in the response from the humans they needed, i.e. being helped and removed from the situation.

The dog's owner will need to be very clear on when intervention might be required, and how to safely and effectively intervene in those instances. It is worth noting that studies suggest that most dog owners are unable to identify a potentially unsafe situation between a child and dog beyond the very obvious scenarios (i.e. restrictive hugging or

approaching them when they are eating), and many dog bites occur during benign interactions such as stroking, grooming, or simply reaching for the dog (*Arhant et al, 2016*).

For a more comprehensive overview of canine communication please visit:

**[bristol.ac.uk](http://bristol.ac.uk)**

The responsibilities of the dog's owner must be recognised by their colleagues and the school's senior management; and we are confident the whole school community would want to play an important role in ensuring the wellbeing of the school dog. This may involve allowing the dog's owner to prioritise the dog's needs during the school day. For example, a teacher responsible for a school dog may not be able to attend a lunchtime meeting in order to avoid overlooking the dog's needs around exercise / toileting / play break etc., as this could lead to toileting inside, boredom and frustration, or general impairment to overall wellbeing. This is also a lovely opportunity to show children how to prioritise the welfare of another species that is dependent on us. It's a helpful opportunity to model pro-welfare behaviours and encourage a sense of responsibility to animals in our care.

It's recommended that the dog's owner takes out appropriate insurance cover. Dog Trust membership does offer 3<sup>rd</sup> party insurance; however, this only covers 'pet' dogs. If the dog is being used to provide training or a service at the school, the insurer will likely no longer treat the dog as a 'pet' and they wouldn't then be suitably covered by some policies. We recommend talking to different insurance providers to find the most suitable policy for your situation.

### **The dog's welfare and needs**

Dogs enjoy consistency and predictability so if you do decide to bring a dog into school, it is important to consider carefully where they will spend their time. As well as being supervised at all times by their owner, they must have an area where they can rest undisturbed, and always be **free to move away** from a child, adult, or situation if they choose to. It is also preferable that there is designated outside space, away from the children, where the dog can exercise and go to the toilet undisturbed. They must also have constant access to clean water.

It is important that outside of their school dog role, the dog lives in a home environment and returns to that place at the end of each school day. They should never remain in the school alone or overnight.

Before allowing a dog into school on a regular basis, or full time, we strongly advise seeking advice from a Clinical Animal Behaviourist. It will likely be a valuable investment and will allow the Behaviourist to work on the skills and attitude that will help a dog feel safe and confident and able to relax within the school environment.

- The Animal Behaviour and Training Council (ABTC) is a regulatory body that represents and maintains registers of animal trainers and behaviourists fulfilling accreditation criteria and belonging to approved member associations: **[abtcouncil.org.uk](http://abtcouncil.org.uk)**

- In addition, the Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour (ASAB) is an independent organisation which accredits Certified Clinical Animal Behaviourists (CCAB): [asab.org](http://asab.org)
- Veterinarians who hold Advanced Practitioner or Specialist Status in Animal Behaviour can be found via the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons: [findavet.rcvs.org.uk](http://findavet.rcvs.org.uk)

Training and socialisation are extremely important for all dogs, but even more so for a school dog in order to prepare them for the demands the role will place on them. Thorough socialisation and completing a course of training classes are essential **before** the dog is introduced to the school environment. Although not aimed specifically at school dogs, our very own **Dog Trust's Dog School** offers cost-effective dog training classes; you can find more information here: [dogstrust.org.uk](http://dogstrust.org.uk)

When choosing training classes, we recommend only joining those that use positive reinforcement as their approach. Below are some of the main reasons we recommend using positive reinforcement and reward-based training, but you can also visit our dedicated webpage linked here that covers this important and interesting topic in more detail: [dogstrust.org.uk](http://dogstrust.org.uk)

### **Why do we recommend reward-based training?**

Training with rewards (such as treats and toys) is the best way to encourage your dog to behave as you would like on a day-day basis:

- science tells us that reward-based training is the best way for dogs to learn.
- training with rewards is fun and helps build a positive bond between dog and owner.
- owners that train using rewards report fewer behaviour problems in their dogs.
- reward based training can help build confidence and encourage dogs to think for themselves.

If the dog is used to an adult-only home, or only children of a particular age, it is essential they are slowly introduced to children of varying ages, gradually, positively and considerately, **before** being introduced to the school environment. Children of different ages exhibit different behaviours and in the interests of the dog's welfare it is essential they are given sufficient time to adjust to being in the company of children of different ages. They will also need time to adjust to the environment itself; they will need to acclimatise slowly and be able to thoroughly explore and sniff the environment on a number of occasions before ever meeting children, teachers and any other staff. They will also need to slowly get used to the noise and generally lively activity that comes with the school environment. Furthermore, they will need to be given time to adapt to and familiarise with the smell and presence of food during lunch and break times. These types of situation could be highly arousing for many dogs.

when a dog first starts to come into the school environment with children present, planning a gradual introduction might help avoid them becoming overwhelmed.

Taking them home after a short period on their first day, then building up the length of time for which they remain in school gradually over days at a time, provides gradual exposure to the activities within a school which might otherwise be experienced as overwhelming.

To further expand on the previous point, it is **essential** for the dog to first visit the school during the holidays, or over several weekends, giving them the chance to explore the environment gradually, slowly, and calmly.

- allow them to sniff the entire environment at their own pace so they become familiar with it (this can be done with the dog on a loose lead)
- introduce sounds they are likely to experience, such as the school bell, using rewards they like to help create a positive association with these sounds (louder noises such as the fire alarm can be introduced at a reduced intensity to help the dog remain relaxed – for example, while the dog is in the playground).
- take in their own bed, water bowl, some treats/chew toys etc. to create a comfortable and familiar den in which to rest during the day.
- practice settling the dog in the place where they will spend the majority of their time when in school, making this a pleasant place to rest.

The school environment is very different to what most dogs are familiar with or will typically enjoy, and, as already explained, many dogs will find it stressful. However, we do not necessarily recommend introducing a dog to school at a very young age, while they are becoming used to the sights, sounds, smells and interactions within their home environment and local community. Exposure to a school environment might also interfere with a puppy's natural sleeping patterns, which could have a detrimental impact on their behaviour and wellbeing.

When you are confident that your dog is ready to attend school with pupils in the building, you will need to plan a *gradual* introduction process. For the first few months the dog should attend school only for short periods and meet only small groups of children in controlled situations, and any physical interaction should only involve one child at a time – and this should always remain the case, not just during the initial introduction process.

Avoid walking around school with the dog at busy times when the corridors are noisy. The dog's owner should observe the dog very carefully and watch out for any indicators of stress or worry. Gradually build up the amount of time the dog spends in school and the range of situations they experience, always ensuring that pupils and staff behave calmly around the dog whilst closely observing all of the communication the dog displays. It is important to recognise that some dogs may never be able to attend school full-time. For example, you may find that your dog is happy in school for a couple of hours twice a week but becomes stressed or unhappy if this is extended.

Once your dog has been introduced into the school environment, and you have established a timetable that you are confident is not causing the dog any stress, worry, or frustration, it is essential to continue to consistently monitor their behaviour in school. A dog who is reasonably relaxed in school now may not be in a few months' or years' time. It may be necessary to reduce your dog's time in school as they age, or to retire them altogether from the role of school dog.

In addition to the above point, there might be periods throughout the school year or term where the behaviour of the children may vary, i.e. nearing the Christmas break, or towards the end of the school year as they look forward to the summer holidays. There may also be periods throughout the school year where the school hall may be more frequently used for performance rehearsals, for example, meaning the noises the dog is exposed to are different or increased in volume.

### **Health and Safety**

You may want to send out information to parents when considering introducing a school dog so they have the opportunity to present any concerns they may have. Some children (and indeed staff) may find it stressful or scary to be around dogs; there may also be some who have allergies to dogs. Equally, some children and staff may be very confident around dogs but will need to recognise that every dog is different and may not enjoy the same interactions and experiences as their own dogs, or other dogs they are familiar with.

Dogs Trust cannot advise on a particular breed or type of dog for the role of school dog. We prefer to encourage everyone to remember and consider that all dogs are individuals with their own personalities, likes and dislikes. It is also important to remember that **all** dogs have teeth and are able to behave aggressively if they feel threatened and unable to avoid/escape either the situation they are in, or the perceived source of threat, even though that threat might not be intended.

We would advise carrying out a robust locally-determined risk assessment prior to the dog entering the school.

We would advise putting in place a set of school rules for the staff, children and visitors on how to behave safely and considerately around the dog, establishing clear boundaries and a focus on the dog's needs. We are hopeful that our overall advice in this document, plus any further 1:1 discussions, as well as the safety advice we offer on our dedicated education website, [learnwithdogstrust.org.uk](https://www.learnwithdogstrust.org.uk), will help you to formulate your school rules. We recommend highlighting the need for the dog to have an appropriate environment, with ample opportunity to remove themselves, or be removed, from situations where they are displaying signs of stress, worry or frustration. The rules will need to be revisited on a regular basis, and always when new pupils/staff start at the school. We would recommend that the general school guidance for supply teachers includes information about how to behave around the school dog and be sure to include all staff when sharing information about the school dog, including midday meal supervisors, kitchen staff and cleaners. This is a great opportunity for all adults within the school community to model to the children safe and respectful behavior towards and around the resident school dog, and to show a collective commitment to the dog's wellbeing.

You may need a reference from the dog's Vet to confirm that their health makes them suitable for life as a school dog, or to highlight any medical issues that needs to be taken into consideration and communicated to the rest of the school. This is again another lovely opportunity to show how we give equal attention and concern to any medical needs of the animals in our lives. We recommend updating this at least annually. It is also advisable to check with your local council/academy trust whether they have a policy on school dogs.

It is essential that the school management and the dog's potential owner familiarise themselves with the law with respect to liability should there be an incident involving the dog at school. It is likely that both the school and the dog's owner will need public liability insurance to cover any situations that might arise. We would advise you to check carefully with your school's insurer that a school dog is covered. For the owner, standard pet insurance may not cover the dog while on the school premises as we previously highlighted; they are likely to be classed as a 'working dog' rather than 'pet'. For both school and owner, it may be necessary to take out specialist insurance to ensure suitable protection.

We hope you have found this guide helpful, and as mentioned at the start we are happy to offer a free of charge video call to explain any points mentioned throughout that either haven't been clear, or that you would just like to discuss further. Please contact us at [educ@dogstrust.org.uk](mailto:educ@dogstrust.org.uk).

## **Dogs Trust Education Dogs**

Dogs Trust has a large team of Education and Community Officers delivering online and in-person workshops to primary schools across the country. In September 2019, with dog welfare concerns at the forefront of our considerations, we made the decision to withdraw the use of real dogs from the education programme. As an alternative to real dogs, all of our Education and Community Officers are accompanied by toy dogs, and in a few cases robotic dogs, both of which are very popular with both pupils and staff. This allows pupils the opportunity to safely practice how to manage their behaviour around a very real looking dog without creating any risk to any party.

In addition, after undertaking our own internal research into the impact our school workshops have on pro-welfare attitudes, we found that learning is not enhanced by the presence of a real dog, and conversely not impaired by the alternative presence of a pretend, life-like dog.

Another small-scale study from the University of Portsmouth found that although children preferred a workshop with a real dog, their overall enjoyment of the workshop they had with a robotic dog was high, and they actually expressed more positive emotions following interaction with the robot.

There are many benefits to using pretend or robotic dogs for both the children and the real dogs that would otherwise be used. We are keen to continue advocating and exploring this brilliant alternative, and we hope to create excitement and reassurance



about the role a pretend or robotic dog can play in the educational and emotional development of children.

**Disclaimer**

All the information given to you here is intended to be general information only and it should not be treated as specific information relating to your dog. We recommend that you obtain appropriate advice from your vet that is specific to your dog. Unless prohibited by law, Dogs Trust does not accept liability to any person relating to the use of the information given here, which is generic and should not be treated as a substitute for specific veterinary advice relating to your dog which you should consult your vet on.