



The pros and cons of school dogs

Do dogs belong in schools? Many would say that if you want to improve children's mental health and wellbeing, then yes, they do.

School dogs have increased in popularity in the UK over the past 6 years, with many schools listing the numerous benefits they feel their four-legged members of staff has on their entire school community. It seems that Ofsted are observing the benefits of this too! In 2019, Schools Week found that 12 Ofsted reports had 'praised schools for using therapy dogs'. So, what are these benefits exactly?

The benefits of a school dog:

Schools that have a school dog have the following listed as some of the many benefits:

- dogs can help children develop empathy skills, encourage them to act respectfully and improve relationships between children
- reading to a dog can be beneficial for reluctant readers. There is less pressure and less perceived judgement when reading to a dog
- dogs can have a calming effect on children
- they can help children develop emotional literacy
- dogs can encourage children who are typically more withdrawn, to engage with and participate in school life
- they can help children to regulate their own behaviour
- dogs can reduce stress and improve wellbeing for both children and staff
- they can improve self-esteem for children

What does the research say?

The amount of UK research looking at the impact that school dogs can have, is small. However, more research has come out of America and Australia, where school dogs and therapy dogs in school have been more commonplace.

The pros

Research from Monash University in Australia, found that the pros of having a school dog included:

Enhancing wellbeing and reducing stress

Researchers found evidence that having a therapy dog can 'enhance children's wellbeing in a variety of settings, including schools'.

They also found evidence that therapy dogs can 'reduce physiological symptoms of stress' by:

- lowering cortisol levels
- increasing children's positive emotions
- promoting engagement in learning activities
- encouraging positive attitudes toward learning
- reducing negative behaviours
- encouraging positive social behaviours

A research review conducted by Georgia Southern University in the USA, supports these findings. The review found 'much evidence' to support 'the emotional and social benefits of children interacting with a dog in the classroom.'

Improving learning outcomes

Research from both Monash University and Georgia Southern University found that children benefited from increased confidence, improved literacy skills and an improvement in reading scores when they read to dogs. Specifically, reading to a dog led to:

- an improvement in reading accuracy
- improved oral reading fluency
- better comprehension
- more positive attitudes towards reading
- improved behaviours toward reading

Improving physical development

One study, observed in Georgia Southern University's review, demonstrated that children were more motivated to participate in gross motor skills activities when a dog modelled these skills.



The cons

The most common objection for introducing a furry member of staff was concerns around hygiene. Bernie would be exercised off site or in the carpark area where the children do not access. Any accidents in school would be cleaned immediately by his handler at the time.

Allergies

Research demonstrated that the main concern listed by schools was that children may have allergies to the dog's fur. This is why non-shedding, hypoallergenic poodle cross breeds are particularly popular as school dogs. Bernie is a Cockapoo - Cocker spaniel and poodle mix. He lives with my son George who is allergic to fur, feathers, pollen, tree mulch, horses and various other things. George has never had a reaction to Bernie.

Safety concerns

Schools raised concerns regarding dog bites and the risk assessments needed in place because of this. RA attached

Animal welfare

The researchers acknowledged 'ethical issues surrounding animal welfare' including:

- ensuring that the dog's needs are met in the school setting

- making sure that the dog is safe
- not overworking the dog

Bernie will only be monitored closely by myself and his handlers. If we feel he is in any distress he will be taken back to my office and taken home at the earliest possible time.

Funding

Another 'barrier' was funding (caring for a dog comes with substantial costs) and a lack of support from staff. Bernie will be fully funded by myself as our family dog. There will be no cost to the school.

The Dogs Trust states that,

'Having a dog in school may be beneficial for the children, but it needs to be equally enjoyable for the dog. 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.'

