



Big Bear Bespoke Education Consultancy Educational Fact Sheet

Using Therapy Dogs in Schools

Therapy animals are amazing, but we are very concerned about the number of local schools simply buying a 'school dog' or allowing staff-owned animals to visit – without proper checks and safeguards. Increasingly schools are leaving themselves open to legal cases around nips and bites, school hygiene and allergy cases, and sadly mis-treatment of animals cases too.

- Check you have followed all guidance and regulations! Your safeguarding, first aid, curriculum, allergies and hygiene policies will all need updating!
- A Therapy Dog does not come under the same legislation as an Assistance Dog but as a minimum you should have a letter from a vet and/or an assessment from a qualified animal behaviouralist on file to certify that the dog has the right temperament for the work. The vet will seemingly 'mistreat' the animal such as squeezing between paw pads to see how the animal reacts to pain, before writing the letter for you. Assistance dogs should be registered as such and have a certificate to say they have passed the PAT test, carried out by an authorised professional
- You need to make sure that the animal and it's agreed handler have insurance – do NOT assume you are covered by a school's public liability insurance
- It is best practice for the animal to have a 'job description' and a 'working conditions' document which can be requested by any authoritative body, including Ofsted or the RSPCA. There should be a clear plan for how the animal is to be treated and looked after.
- Your animal must have a care plan which includes that it is vaccinated, wormed and chipped. Vet checks should be more regular than for a usual family pet as the vet needs to be assured that the animal is healthy and does not show signs of stress due to its employment.
- Your animal should not be fed a raw food diet as there is a risk of Salmonella to students if this is the case – even if the food is given off the school premises
- It is best practise to have a bereavement plan in place for the animal in case of accidental death – how will you work with the students to deal with this situation?
- Clear safeguarding expectations should be in place around whether the dog is tethered, caged or loose. You need to show you have risk assessed for worst case scenarios such as an attack on a student or the animal running into the road.
- If the animal is to be walked by students, it should be harness trained – it should know what is expected of it when it is in a therapy dog harness.
- Students need to be clear about what they can and can't allow the dog to do – look at the Assistance Dog regulations for guidance, as aspects such as licking and jumping up are often 'let slip' by therapy dog owners – think carefully about what you will allow as it needs to be consistent across the school, including for those with phobias, or you risk confusing the animal
- Have a 'fit to work' form for every day the dog is in use – dogs get in bad or 'funny' moods too – if it seems 'out of sorts' DO NOT USE IT.
- What continual training and exposure training will you provide for the animal? Our Therapy Dog, Adam is trained by a qualified animal behaviouralist (one of the few who works with the police to decide euthanasia and temperament assessments) 3x a week. He is tested in new situations whenever the school introduces a new policy (such as lock down for example), he is trained to go towards students who are crying and trained to leave students with closed body language alone.
- All dogs, no matter how small, are 'wolves kept as puppies' Never leave a dog alone with a student