



# The school dogs toolkit



**A practical guide to support schools  
and other educational settings**

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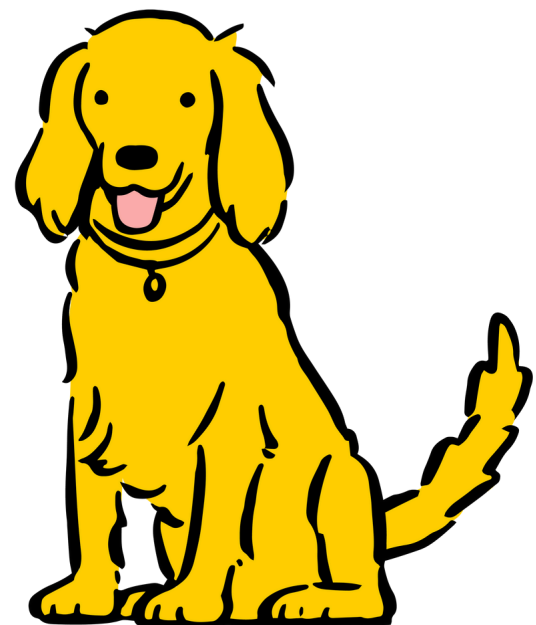
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# 1. Introduction

At Dogs Trust, we know how special the bond between humans and dogs can be. Dogs bring joy, love, companionship, and can help children flourish. But it's also important to make sure that any dog in a school or educational setting is happy, safe, and actively enjoys their role.

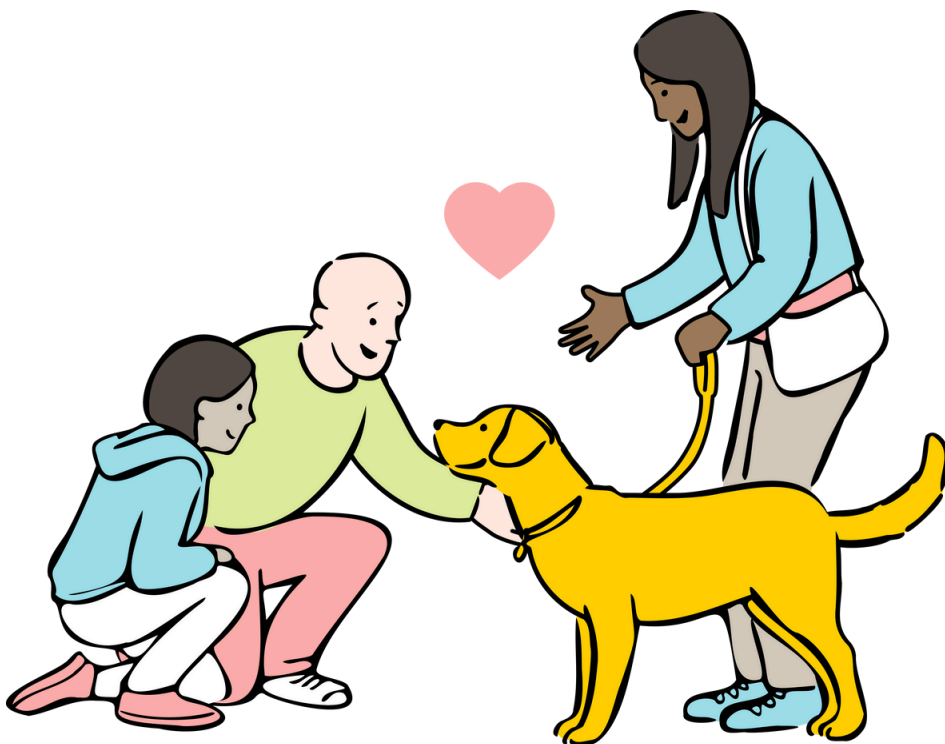


This guide aims to help schools and other educational settings make informed decisions. We'll walk you through the key questions to consider, the practical steps to take, and how to create a nurturing environment that works for everyone.

## 2. A quick note

Having a dog in a school or educational setting has become increasingly popular in the UK. We recognise the many benefits of being around dogs (hey, you don't need to convince us!), and we know that dogs can support learning and wellbeing. We aim to offer as much supportive and helpful advice as we can throughout this guide while remaining honest about our thoughts. As a member of the Pet Education Partnership, a coalition of the UK's eight leading animal welfare charities, we have developed the following position statement.

**Learning together**



# 3. Position statement from the Pet Education Partnership

## Pet Education Partnership



The Pet Education Partnership (PEP), a collaboration of leading UK animal welfare charities, aims to inspire and shape life-long and compassionate behaviours towards animals. We understand that schools may wish to include real dogs into the learning environment to enrich children’s social, emotional and educational development. We also recognise the unique bond dogs share with people and the special role they play in many lives.

However, in light of what we understand about dog welfare and the practical realities of busy school settings, PEP believes this approach isn’t the only option for those considering a school dog. As such, we wish to champion alternative approaches to school dogs that can provide similar benefits, without any compromise to animal welfare.

### **Rethinking the role of dogs in learning**

Having a dog in a school environment may be beneficial for children and staff, but there are additional considerations, such as:

- distraction from learning – dogs can divert attention from lessons
- additional responsibility for teachers – managing both the children and the dog requires extra effort.
- health and safety considerations, including:
  - allergies – some children or staff may be allergic to dogs or dog hair
  - fear or phobia of dogs – certain individuals may experience anxiety or distress
  - hygiene and cleanliness – managing shedding, drool and toileting to maintain a clean environment
  - bites or scratches – ensuring proper supervision to prevent injuries
  - zoonotic diseases – preventing the spread of illnesses that can transfer from dogs to humans.

Ensuring the dogs are safe, healthy and content requires meeting all of their legal welfare needs, including:\*

- a safe, comfortable and suitable environment
- the right amount of suitable food and access to fresh, clean water
- appropriate companionship and time alone as needed
- protection from pain, harm and suffering and access to timely veterinary care
- the opportunity to behave in ways that are natural to them and to have choices about when and where to do that.

When these needs are consistently met, and dogs are given safe, positive experiences, they have the opportunity to live their best life. In some education settings however, dogs' needs may become compromised. Unpredictability and challenging stimuli, such as exposure to noise, overhandling, lack of appropriate rest areas and a change from familiar environment, all create stressful experiences for dogs.

### **Working together on suitable alternatives**

There are many ways that dogs can feature in young people's lives at school, while also prioritising welfare and safety. We encourage schools to explore alternatives that provide similar benefits, such as the use of robotic or soft toy dogs. These alternative dogs can be incredibly life-like, show similar behaviours such as tail wagging and resting and are inclusive to all while not compromising animal welfare. In addition, carefully designed teaching resources can be delivered that bring the wonder of dogs into learning without any compromise to welfare.

### **Let's start a new conversation**

By working together, we believe it's possible to create rich, inspiring learning experiences that also respect every dog's needs. These alternative methods reflect core values we all wish to share with the next generation - respect, compassion and empathy.

\* As set out in The Animal Welfare Act 2006 (England and Wales), the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, and the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

## **Pet Education Partnership**



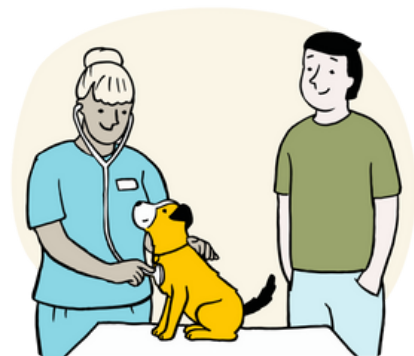
# 4. Suitability checklist

## Is a school dog the right choice for you?

Use this quick checklist to support decision-making

### ? Key questions

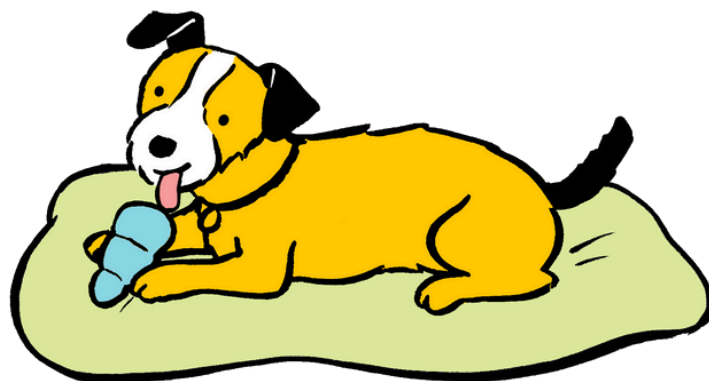
- Does the school environment lend itself to offering a calm, quiet space for a dog when needed?
- Have pupil needs (allergies, fears, cultural) been assessed?
- If you have a dog in mind, are they relaxed and confident in busy, noisy surroundings?
- Has the dog had a routine check-up with a vet in the last six months and been deemed physically well and healthy?
- Can the owner consistently supervise the dog as needed?
- Is there a plan for care if the owner is absent, or if the dog is poorly or unable to attend school?



# 5. School dog essentials!

**Every school dog needs to have:**

- a quiet place to rest and sleep undisturbed
- access to water at all times
- regular breaks for rest and toileting
- freedom to opt out of interactions
- informed, close adult supervision
- access to alternative care if needed.





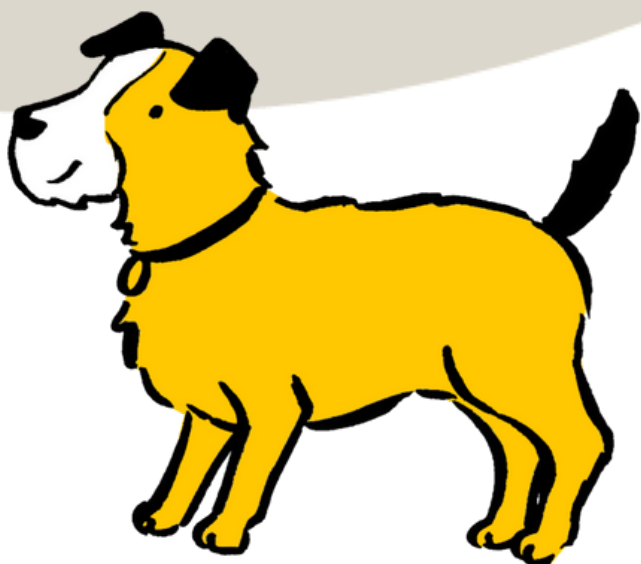
# 6. Roles and responsibilities

We encourage a whole school commitment to a school dog

## The role of the dog's owner

- Have sufficient understanding of **dog body language** and be able to quickly identify signs of stress or anxiety. This includes more subtle signs of stress such as lip licking and yawning so the dog can be given space as soon as they need it.
- Know how to **closely supervise** child-dog interactions following the 3S's (Stay close - Step in - Separate).
- Be readily available throughout the day to support the dog as needed, i.e. taking the dog for regular toilet breaks, or moving them to a quiet place to rest and relax.
- Ensure staff and children are well informed about safe behaviour and how to support a dog's wellbeing. Our **new digital school programme** includes four workshops designed to build this understanding, including our brand new 'School Dogs' workshop!

Click the **bold words** to access our resources!



# 6. Roles and responsibilities

We encourage a whole school commitment to a school dog

## The role of school staff

- Have an understanding of **dog body language** and how to respond appropriately.
- Know how to **closely supervise** child-dog interactions following the 3S's (Stay close - Step in - Separate).
- Role model safe behaviour around the school dog, i.e. follow the ABC's (Affection - Busy- Choice) that are covered in our **new digital school programme**.
- Remind and support pupils to follow agreed school dog rules, i.e. asking a grown-up's permission before stroking or interacting with the school dog.

Click the **bold words** to access our resources!



# 6. Roles and responsibilities

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Click the **bold words** to access our resources!



## The role of the pupils

- Follow agreed school dog rules, including the ABC's (Affection - Busy- Choice) taught in our free digital '**School Dogs**' workshop.
- Have an understanding of dog body language covered in the 'School Dogs' workshop.
- Role model safe, kind behaviours around the school dog to set an example to other pupils.

## The role of Governors and senior leaders

- Have an up-to-date understanding of available research around use of dogs in animal assisted education.
- Have an understanding of relevant animal welfare legislation, i.e. **The Animal Welfare Act 2006**.
- Complete a risk assessment.
- Consider and support any financial commitment that the school will need to make.



# 7. Training and Behaviour

## Why is training important?

Training and socialisation are important for all dogs, but even more so for a school dog to prepare them as best as possible for their important role.

When choosing training classes, we recommend only joining those that use positive reinforcement. We offer more information on our website about **using reward-based training**, including why it's so important to follow this approach for everyone's safety and wellbeing. The **Animal Behaviour and Training Council (ABTC)** is a good place to look for accredited dog trainers.



## Dog behaviour

Dogs, like people, communicate in different ways - and those signals can change depending on how they're feeling. A dog may turn away and blink to show they're anxious, but if these subtle signs are missed, they might escalate to more obvious behaviours like lunging or growling. If that response works to get them out of a situation, they're likely to use it again. That's why it's so important to spot and respond to subtle signs early, giving dogs the space they need, so they never feel they have to shout to be heard.

Every dog is an individual, and like humans their behaviour and needs can change throughout their lifetime. A dog who was originally suitable to be in a school or learning environment, may start to show signs eventually that they are ready for the retired life. For everyone's safety and wellbeing, it's important to keep considering whether the dog's suitability might have changed over time.

If you have any questions or concerns about a dog's behaviour, our free **Behaviour Support Line** can help you - the sooner you call us when you notice an issue, the easier it is for us to support you.

# 8. Top tips for preparing your school dog

**Gradual introductions are essential for everyone's safety and wellbeing**

## An introduction plan

- The dog's first few visits to the school should ideally be out of term time, with no children present.
- Allow the dog to sniff and explore the school at their own pace.
- Start to introduce common noises that they will hear. Start with a quiet recording of the school bell and gradually build up to the real thing. Use **positive reinforcement** when your dog responds calmly (it will help them to understand that calm behaviour is what you want). Our resource about **helping dogs with new sounds** can support you with this.
- During term-time, start with just short visits while they become familiar with the school being busier and noisier - give them plenty of breaks and space to relax.
- If they seem relaxed, happy, and engaged, slowly increase the amount of time the dog spends in school.
- Establish clear rules for pupils to follow about interacting with the school dog from the outset:
  - o only one child at a time should interact with the dog, and only with a grown-up present
  - o pupils should always ask permission first before stroking or interacting with the dog
  - o encourage pupils to use quiet voices, gentle hands, and to allow the dog to move away if they want to without being followed (our free digital **'School Dogs' workshop** will really support the children with this).



# 10. Useful resources

**Click the words in bold to be taken to the resources!**

- The **Pet Education Partnership website** and **learning resources**.
- How to understand your **dog's body language**.
- Dogs and children: living safely together - **support on how to closely supervise** child-dog interactions.
- **Dogs Trust's new digital school programme** features four exciting workshops:
  - Living safely with dogs
  - Staying safe around dogs when out and about
  - Wellbeing, dogs and me
  - School dogs.
- The Dogs Trust guide to **using positive reinforcement** and training with rewards.
- **Dogs Trust's Behaviour Support Line** (0303 003 6666).
- **The National School Dog Alliance**.



## Thank you!

### 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 or behaviour advice relating to your dog which you should consult your vet on.