



School Dogs

Incorporating a dog into a school or educational setting is a trend that is growing in popularity within the UK. 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. This document aims to be clear on Dogs Trust's position on this issue, and to highlight the many elements for consideration which lead us to conclude that this is an inadvisable initiative.

There is evidence to suggest that when dogs are used for Animal Assisted Intervention – such as dogs in schools - this can lead to compromised welfare in the animal (*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 purpose.

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, and this is unlikely to be achievable in a school environment for the majority of dogs.

The school environment can be a very busy, noisy and unpredictable place and extremely 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 animal (*Arhant et al, 2016*).

We would therefore strongly advise against introducing a dog to a school environment.

The following points are for careful consideration by both the school and the potential owner of the dog before deciding to undertake this significant commitment.

The owner's responsibility and commitment

- It is important to remember that a school dog **does not** belong to a school; it belongs to an owner with whom it forms an important bond and lives as part of the family. The fact that the dog's owner is a head teacher, teacher, or teaching assistant (for example) does not minimise their duties and responsibilities as the dog's owner; there is still a legal and moral duty of care towards the animal at all times.
- 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 its 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** taking on the commitment of a taking their dog into school, in case their dog proves unsuitable for the role of school dog. Dogs have different characters, and an individual dog may turn out to be temperamentally unsuitable for life in the stressful school environment. It is also possible for dogs to develop medical conditions that make their attendance at school impossible or, over time, to become less tolerant of the noise and activity at school.
- 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 any dog in a school environment be supervised by the owner **at all times**. As noted above, the school environment is likely to be stressful for the dog. The owner, who knows the dog best, must ensure that as soon as the dog is indicating that it needs to be removed from a situation this can be actioned. This responsibility should not be passed, even temporarily, to someone else.
- It is essential that the dog's owner is well-versed in canine communication and can quickly and easily identify the range of subtle signals that the dog is stressed or worried. A comprehensive understanding of dog behaviour and the canine ladder of aggression is critical to ensure both the dog's wellbeing and pupil safety. The owner will need to be very clear on when an 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, and many dog bites occur during benign interactions such as stroking, grooming, or reaching for the dog (*Arhant et al, 2016*). While these studies focus on dogs in the home environment, the implications for a dog in a school setting are clear.
- The responsibilities of the dog's owner must be recognised by their colleagues and the school's senior management, allowing them 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 because the dog needs an exercise / toilet / play break. Schools are very busy places and it is not acceptable for the dog's needs to be overlooked due to the many demands on staff time.

The dog's welfare and needs

- 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 or situation if they choose to. There must also be a designated outside space away from the children where the dog can exercise and go to the toilet.

- The dog will of course need a home to be taken to at the end of each school day and should under **no circumstances** be left alone in the school overnight or for any period of time.
- Before allowing a dog into school on a regular basis, or full time, we strongly advise it is assessed by a Certified Clinical Animal Behaviourist (CCAB). Failure to do so may invalidate your public liability insurance. Ask your Vet for further details on where to find a suitably qualified person.
- 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.

When choosing training classes be sure to avoid trainers that talk about dominance theory/being the 'boss' as these approaches are outdated and based on flawed research. Choose a friendly class, which focusses on using positive reinforcement (treats/toys) to reward desired behaviour. Dog Trust's Dog School run cost-effective dog training classes; you can find more information here, as well as advice on training and behaviour:

www.dogstrustdogschool.org.uk

- If the dog is used to an adult-only home, or only children of a certain age, it is essential they are slowly introduced to children of varying ages, gradually and considerately, **before** being introduced to the school environment. Children of different ages exhibit different behaviours and in the interest of the dog's welfare it is essential they are given sufficient time to adjust to that.
- 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** recommend introducing a dog to school at a very young age. Exposure to this type of environment whilst still a puppy, during the crucial early developmental stages, could prove detrimental to the dog and have a lasting impact on its behaviour and wellbeing.
- Having had your dog certified by a CCAB behaviorist, it is **essential** for the dog to first visit the school during the holidays giving them the chance to explore the environment gradually, slowly, and calmly. They should be introduced to the sounds they are likely to experience, which many dogs would potentially be worried by; the school bell, for example. Allow them to become familiar with the smell of the areas where they are likely to spend most or part of their time (library/classrooms/office). Take in the dog's bed or get a new bed for school so they have somewhere comfortable to rest during the day; along with a water bowl, some treats/chew toys etc. to make them feel more at home and relaxed. Practice getting the dog to settle in what will be its regular environment(s).



- When you are confident that your dog is ready to attend school with pupils in the building, and it has been approved by a qualified behaviourist (see above), 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. Avoid walking around school 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. Gradually build up the amount of time the dog spends in school and the range of situations it experiences, always ensuring that pupils and staff behave calmly around the dog while watching carefully for stress indicators. 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 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 stress, it is essential to continue to monitor its behaviour in school. A dog who is reasonably relaxed in school now may not be a in a few months or years. 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.

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.
- While it is advisable to look for a breed of dog which is considered calm and tolerant, it is important to remember that **all** dogs have teeth and have the potential to bite if warning signals are ignored and their boundaries are pushed. There is no such thing as a bomb-proof dog, however steady or confident that dog may seem within its home.
- We would advise carrying out a robust 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 cannot advise what these are but hopefully our overall advice in this document will highlight the need for the dog to have an appropriate environment with ample opportunity to remove itself, or be removed, from situations where it is displaying stress signals. The rules will need to be revisited on a regular basis, and always when new pupils / staff start at the school. Ensure that 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. It is vital that all adults model to the children safe and respectful behavior towards the dog.



- You may need a reference from the dog's Vet to confirm that their health makes them suitable for life as a school dog. This will need updating 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 it will 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 coverage.

Dogs Trust Education Dogs

Dogs Trust has a team of Education and Community officers (ECOs) delivering workshops in schools across the county. Some of the team take their dogs into schools. There are a range of important safeguards we put into place to ensure the welfare of our Education Dogs, including:

- ECOs must have owned their dog for at least six months before taking it into school, to ensure a firm bond has been established between dog and owner;
- Dogs Trust Education Dogs are assessed by our Training and Behaviour Advisors before their first visit to school, and on a six month basis thereafter. If there is any concern about the dog's enjoyment of, and suitability for, visiting schools it is immediately retired from this work;
- All ECOs are given full training around the handling of dogs and canine behaviour, prior to taking a dog into school;
- ECOs are expected to have daily dog-care available as a back up, if for any reason the dog is unable to go to school (e.g., illness, high temperatures, long travel times)
- ECOs are required to monitor their dog's body language and behaviour throughout the school visit and ensure that their dog is never expected to interact with adults or children if it is displaying signs that it does not want to be stroked.
- If their dog is displaying any sign of stress, ECOs are instructed to cut short their school visit to ensure the wellbeing of the dog.

Many of our Dogs Trust Education Officers deliver workshops in schools using a toy dog rather than a real dog, and the learning process is in no way impaired by this. Our research indicates that there is no difference in impact on pupils' learning between having a real dog and a toy dog



present during the workshop. Whilst we appreciate the content of our workshops, and our intended learning outcomes, will be different to that of a school's, we feel this is still a point for consideration.

We hope you find this guidance document helpful, and we would urge you to give this decision very serious consideration.