

# Jells Park Primary School

The logo features six black paw prints in a horizontal row. Each paw print contains a white letter: 'D', 'P', 'A', 'W', 'S'. The second paw print contains a white horizontal line. To the right of the paw prints is the word 'Program' in a serif font.

*(Dogs Providing Academic and Wellbeing Support)*

## **The aim:**

To significantly improve student academic outcomes and student well-being. To positively impact in on the students' school experience and to build a stronger connection to school, while improving student attendance and reducing negative student behaviours.

## **The Idea in a Nutshell:**

Jells Park Primary School has a school dog that improves the educational experience for all students.

How it works:

- A willing staff member adopts a suitable dog
- Completes the required training
- The dog is introduced to the school slowly, spoken about before he/she arrives, taken around to visit each class for a few minutes during the day and then stays with his/her owner for perhaps two or three weeks to get used to the school day routine. Students who have an aversion to dogs are worked with one on one to overcome any doubts or fears.
- The dog's time is then timetabled to work with those students who are identified as having the greatest need (e.g. the low grade ones reading, the low grade 6s writing) or students with anxiety or additional needs. The day will also include break times where the dog can sit in a withdrawal space (ideally an office space that is separate from the classroom)
- During scheduled lunchtime sessions or afternoon sessions a group of students who are identified as having social skills issues will form a D-PAWS club and work in a small group situation with the dog and the dog's owner to work together on different tasks such as baking dog biscuits, playing soccer on the parklands, taking the dog for a walk or visiting the kinder and nursing home
- We evaluate the program regularly to check that it is making a positive impact on the school, with a focus on student well-being, connectedness to school and academic results.

## Why and how it will benefit students:

Over the years, numerous research studies have been undertaken to validate the benefits of animal assistance activity and in particular the contribution of therapy dogs. Empirical evidence has shown that therapy dogs can enhance children's psychological development, improve social skills, and increase self-esteem among other benefits. Dogs can also teach responsibility, compassion, and respect for living things. Dogs in the classroom can be used to calm fears, relieve anxiety and teach skills. Here is a summary of potential benefits (Data adapted from the Australian Companion Animal Council):

**Physical:** interaction with a furry friend reduces blood pressure, provides tactile stimulation, assists with pain management, gives motivation to move, walk and stimulates the senses.

**Social:** a visit with a dog provides a positive mutual topic for discussion, promotes greater self-esteem and well-being, and focused interaction with others.

**Cognitive:** companionship with a dog stimulates memory, problem solving and game playing

**Emotional:** an adorable four-legged visitor improves self-esteem, acceptance from others, and lifts mood often provoking laughter

**Environmental:** a dog in a facility decreases the feeling of a sterile environment, lifts mood and this continues after visit.

Research has demonstrated that therapy dogs properly managed in the school setting can not only make a measurable difference in terms of gaining skills such as reading enhancement, but also in contributing critically to emotional and relational development. School counsellors are finding that the presence of a therapy dog can decrease anxiety and enable students to work through issues such as anger management, bullying tendencies and other psycho/social problems. The introduction of a non-threatening therapy dog can serve such as a catalytic vehicle for forming adaptive and satisfactory social interactions. Guided activities and group discussions help teach students how to handle interpersonal conflicts and develop constructive responses<sup>i</sup>.

Interaction with animals can have a positive effect on our students with additional needs. According to a study conducted by the University of Queensland animals help children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) interact better with their peers and improve positive behaviours. The results of this study found that when animals were present instead of toys children with ASD displayed more social behaviours such as talking, making physical contact and looking at faces<sup>ii</sup>.

At Jells Park Primary School we have several additional needs students who would benefit immensely from this program and an increasing number of students who show signs of anxiety, are experiencing difficulties at home or are going through some social issues.

There is limited research into how significantly a therapy dog can improve a students' overall academic performance but there is however research that shows that a therapy dog can improve specific reading skills. Julie Paradide's study into the use of therapy dogs with struggling readers showed an increase in the students' abilities when identifying, describing, explaining, predicting, applying, summarizing, differentiating, analyzing, and inferring texts<sup>iii</sup>.

Friesen's research exploring the use of therapy animals in the classroom suggests that "Educators tend to think of the word support as indicating direct and verbal involvement when working with children. Ironically, these animals may be able to offer children unique and valuable social and emotional support precisely because they are active and willing participants, but with the qualifier that it is outside the realm of their communicative abilities to verbally criticize or judge the child's progress" (Friesen 2009). As Melson (2001) states, animals may offer children "...a time-out from the anxieties of human exchange... Despite most children's acknowledgement that [animals] cannot literally comprehend what they are saying, children have the feeling of being heard and being understood"<sup>iv</sup>.

The school dog can be used to work on Social and Emotional goals with selected students. One program in America<sup>v</sup> uses a five step program of looking after the dog to highlight issues students may be having. They look at dog communication and body language (what message does our body language send to others), proper dog care (looking after needs) dog training (how to effectively communicate), Obstacle course (working towards a goal with small steps and positive actions and speech) Class presentation (reward for hard work sharing what they've accomplished with the dog).

Information found on the KidsMatter website suggest that it's estimated that 1 in 7 school-aged children has a mental health problem, such as anxiety, depression and behavior problems, but only 1 in 4 get the help they need, nearly half of all mental health problems begin before the age of 14 and that Education settings are well-placed to comprehensively support children's mental health and well-being<sup>vi</sup>. Research shows that using animal assisted interactions or therapy can be effective in improving mental health and wellbeing<sup>vii</sup>. The simple act of patting a dog while talking or having the dog present during group discussion allows children to feel at ease and less judgement.

He/She can also be used to calm down nervous students during testing, such as NAPLAN, to help reduce anxiety and to allow students to perform to their best ability. This ability to calm students may also help with our ever growing EAL program, to allow students to develop greater confidence when speaking. Students are more willing to talk to the dog as there is no judgement or correction coming back at them.

Another added benefit is that we would be able to teach students about responsible pet ownership in a positive and real world manner. Students would learn about responsibilities and looking after another living thing. It would help develop empathy and provide a sense of pride for their actions.

Although our main aim is to improve the quality of schooling for our students a school dog will also benefit the school staff. During a research study at an American hospital in 2005 it was found that spending as little as 5 minutes with a therapy dog proved to be effective at lowering staff cortisol levels<sup>viii</sup> and reducing stress.

## **Possible areas of concern:**

### Fear of dogs:

There may be students who have an aversion to dogs. We would aim to work with these students on a one on one scenario with the school dog to build up confidence and to break down any fears.

### Biting:

Parents may be concerned about the dog being aggressive or biting the students. The selected dog will be chosen through a rigorous process to ensure that it has an ideal temperament to work with children and adults in all conditions. The intensive training of the dog and the staff will ensure that expectations of the dog's behavior are met. Students will also be trained in how to appropriately interact with the dog at all times. The dog will be given 'time out' to rest away from the children.

### Allergies:

Some students may have allergies to dog fur. The selected dog will be a hypoallergenic such as a poodle/cross and will shed less if any hair. **The dog will be** bathed and groomed regularly, vaccinated and pre-treated before classroom visits with an anti-allergen powder if necessary to help reduce dander. To protect both the children and the dog, pre and post hand washing with a hand sanitizer will be common practice.

### Hygiene:

The dog will be taken during each break time to toilet in the out of bounds area of the school and all faeces will be cleaned according to council regulations.

### Distracting Children:

As when anything new is introduced into the classroom it is expected that there will be a short period where the novelty may be slightly distracting. It will be made explicitly clear to the students that the dog is there to help with their learning and what appropriate behavior is when the dog is 'working' in the classroom. After some time the novelty will wear off and having the dog in the classroom will become the norm and be no less distracting than the eboards or ipads.

## **Training:**

Once a suitable dog has been selected it will undertake an intensive training course to become a Therapy Dog. The cost of this course may be covered by the owner or in negotiation with the school. The training may, but does not necessarily have to, be provided through Alpha Canine Professional. Their intensive course, is designed to provide a solid foundation to begin your work in professional therapeutic settings (such as Animal-Assisted Therapy - AAT) or visiting, volunteer or recreational settings (such as Animal-Assisted Activities - AAA). The course provides a comprehensive background to Therapy-Dog training with the Canine Leadership System, handling, socialisation, psychology, body language, and Canine Good Behaviour Shaping. It also provides information to help get you started in Animal-Assisted Interventions, including how Human-Animal Interactions (HAI) are beneficial, how to manage ethical and legal issues, and understanding Occupational Health and Safety.

## **Some other schools using school dogs:**

Wantirna South Primary School has a PAWS Up For Learning program that they are continuing to develop. Here is a short testimony from the principal Wayne Macdonald:

We have had Scruff at the school now for over two and a half years. Miss Bec Paton, a prep teacher, came to me and suggested that we consider introducing a dog to our school. Bec is a real animal lover and could see the benefits of having a dog at school.

Much research was done on the benefits of having a dog at school. Much consultation was entered into with all members of the school community before we made the decision to have a dog at school. Once the decision was made we had to select the right type of dog taking into account breed, intelligence, allergy free etc. We also had to factor in the training of the dog e.g. Scruff has been put through the training that guide dogs and diabetic dogs go through.

The benefits of having a school dog have been overwhelmingly positive.

We ran a competition to name the dog amongst the children, and hence the name Scruff.

There are so many stories I could relate about the benefits of having a dog that it would take forever. Most importantly Scruff brings a calmness to the classroom.

We have a number of children who come from broken homes and the benefits of the PAWS program for these children in particular has been fantastic. To see the children sitting in a bean bag reading to Scruff as they pat him even though they may have had a rough night at home is overwhelming.

We also have a number of ASD students at all levels of the spectrum and Scruff has been fantastic for them and a real calming influence.

We have selected children who join the PAWS club every term, these children may have suffered some degree of trauma, may have some social issues or maybe struggling academically but they get enormous satisfaction from playing with Scruff and teaching him tricks etc.

Just the other day I had a parent and her grade two daughter come to see me on a Monday morning both visibly upset about an incident that had happened in the home over the weekend. We brought Scruff into the room, he barked then placed his head on Mum's knee, subconsciously both Mum and her daughter stroked Scruff and within ten minutes the daughter was ready to go to class and Mum ready to head off to work.

I could go on and on about the value of having Scruff as a very important part of our wellbeing program and in fact staff.

Orchard Grove Primary School has a dog that comes to the school most days and visits the children in the classroom. Their principal was quoted in a newspaper article saying that Ruby was helping children to overcome fear of dogs and had been a particular hit with Orchard Grove's autistic students, as well as students who were reluctant to attend school. "The kids who don't want to come to school get to walk her first thing in the morning, She also helps lower anxiety levels in children, and can help literacy levels."

Moorabin Primary School has a therapy dog (Policy from 2014)

Story Dogs is a company that brings dogs in for generally year 2 students to read one on one with a dog for twenty minutes.

Black Rock Primary School

Brighton Primary School

Chelsea Heights Primary School

Cornish College

Elsternwick Primary School

Essex Heights Primary School

Gembrook Primary School

Glengala Primary School

Laburnum Primary School

Our Lady of Mt Carmel Primary School

Rangeview Primary School

Rowville Primary School

Sandringham East Primary School

Sandringham Primary School

Sassafras Primary School

Toorak Primary School

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<sup>i</sup> Charlotte's Litter, Bringing Therapy Dogs To Your School: A practical guide for administrators and educators ([www.charlotteslitter.org](http://www.charlotteslitter.org))

<sup>ii</sup> <https://habri.org/autism> (Human and Animal Bond Research Initiative)

<sup>iii</sup> [http://etd.fcla.edu/CF/CFE0001561/Paradise\\_Julie\\_L\\_200705\\_Ed.D.pdf](http://etd.fcla.edu/CF/CFE0001561/Paradise_Julie_L_200705_Ed.D.pdf) (An analysis of improving student performance through the use of registered therapy dogs serving as motivators for reluctant readers)

<sup>iv</sup> <http://m.kenrodogtraining.com/upload/exploring.pdf> (Exploring Animal-Assisted Programs with Children in School and Therapeutic Contexts, Lori Friesen 2009)

<sup>v</sup> [www.schooltherapydogs.org/animal-assisted-activities](http://www.schooltherapydogs.org/animal-assisted-activities)

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/media/facts-and-figures> (KidsMatter)

<sup>vii</sup> <http://patasterapeutas.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/MetaAna%CC%81lise.pdf> ("Animal Assisted Therapy: A meta analysis". Janelle Nimar & Brad Lundahl University of Utah 2007)

<sup>viii</sup> HABRI Central Briefs: Practitioner Attitudes and Beliefs Regarding the Role of Animals Play in Human Health