

Therapy Dog Program – SSP Policy



Benefits of a Therapy Dog

Here at SSP School, we have identified an increase in the percentage of students who are exhibiting signs of anxiety. The Therapy Dog program will become another strategy that we can draw upon in order to reduce the level of anxiety in our students. The benefits of a Therapy Dog program in schools are endless. They can reduce stress, anxiety, depression, ease loneliness, encourage exercise, playfulness and even improve your cardiovascular health. Interaction with a dog can help children grow up more secure and active, while providing valuable companionship.

Philosophy (Intentions of a Therapy Dog)

The aims of the Therapy Dog program are to assist with improving the levels of well-being and happiness for our children at SSP. Statistics from the WA Health Department relating to children suffering from psychological & well-being issues regarding anxiety & stress are estimated at 1 in 7. We as a School are doing everything we can to help lower those statistics by having a Therapy Dog here at SSP. We know pets are kind, nonjudgmental and a great companion to share and care with. Our Therapy Dog will always be there as your friend!

TD Program - what 'duties' will the Therapy Dog provide to SSP?

There is one allocated Therapy Dog at SSP. No other dogs are permitted to enter the school grounds at any time without prior permission from the Principal. The Therapy Dog will be used in a variety of ways within the school including:

1. Being with individuals or small groups of children to provide comfort
2. Being walked by children identified with anxiety to help reduce this
3. Listening to children's speeches or reading
4. Sitting and being with children at recess and lunchtime
5. Supporting them in emotional situations

Where will the dog be housed during the day whilst at School?

The Therapy Dog will be based down at the ELC with its owner or handler's, and will have a designated area to stay while not in the classroom or with the children. Only SSP staff are allowed to visit the Therapy Dog's designated area at the ELC. Students or their Parents/Siblings/Guardians/etc. can only visit this area when accompanied by an SSP Staff member, and subject to prior arrangement with the dog's owner or handler.

Involvement of Teachers and Students

Participation of the teachers and students is vital for the puppy to learn how to behave in and around the classrooms. Teachers will email the dog's owner / staff member Toni Carrigan to book the dog for a therapy session if they feel it will benefit the students in their classroom. School leaders and parents can also email Toni (Toni.carrigan@cewa.edu.au) to advise if a child is experiencing any loss or difficult times. This will allow additional time to be scheduled, after consultation with the child's Teacher, for the child to see the dog when they're at school to help assist them through their difficult period.

Role of Owner

The role of the owner (Toni Carrigan) is to ensure a safe, calm, happy environment for both the puppy and students. Shelter, food & water given at SPP are to be allocated by Toni to ensure compatibility with the dog. No food is to be offered to the dog, unless discussed with the owner first, as some foods can be dangerous or fatal to dogs (e.g. Chocolate, Grapes, Raisins, etc.)

Link: [Foods Poisonous to Dogs](#)

Protocol; Dog

The school and owner will be responsible for the wellbeing and safety of the children, as well as that of the Therapy Dog whilst at school.

The Therapy Dog will be trained, vet examined, vaccinated, checked for fleas, washed regularly, wormed, and cared for by Toni and her family. The Therapy Dog will not be left alone with any student at any time and the Therapy Dog will be removed if either the student or the dog becomes distressed. The dog will wear a special vest when working within the school indicating it's a 'Therapy Dog'. Sessions will be conducted in areas that will suit both the students and the dog, as previously arranged with the dog's owner or handler.

Safety of Children

Every child should be taught how to behave around dogs in general, including the family's own dog, neighbour's dog, as well as dog's running around the park. Dogs provide us with clues on their disposition or mood, and understanding these key clues will help children avoid any unnecessary 'tricky' situations. All of the students from Kindergarten to Year Six will be explicitly taught about safety around dogs prior to being introduced to our Therapy Dog. We will enforce the Approach, Ask, Pat, Goodbye methodology (see below), not only for the needs of the Student, but also for Staff and the Dog.

Hygiene

Hygiene is essential for all participants. Children will be taught the correct hygiene around hand washing after touching the dog. The dog is not to lick faces or lips of any student. Where possible the handler/owner will toilet the dog in a designated area at the school in a safe and clean manner whilst cleaning up after the dog. Should the dog toilet in an undesignated area that area will be disinfected as required.

Classroom Visits

Within the classroom setting, the Therapy Dog aims to comfort students that are having psychological or emotional difficulties. The Therapy Dog must wear a vest and lead at all times, however it's at the owner or handler's discretion to agree to take off the lead or not. Prior to entering the classroom, the handler / owner must check to see if any child is afraid or allergic to dogs. The handler / owner will request permission from the Teacher whether to enter the classroom or not, and will check how long the Therapy Dog can stay.

If there is an event or incident with the dog

In the unlikely event of an incident with the Therapy Dog, the child's parents will be contacted immediately and the School Nurse will see the child as required.

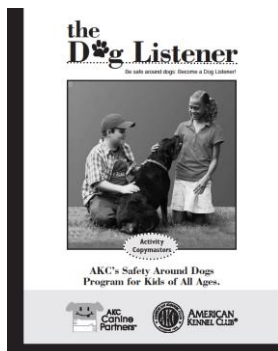
Training of the Puppy

In addition to the Therapy puppy having ongoing 'on the job training' at SSP, it's also currently being trained at home and attending puppy classes ran by the RSPCA.

Useful Information Links

Video: [How to safely approach a Dog - RSPCA](#)

Literature: [the Dog Listener - American Kennel Club](#)



Approach, Ask, Pat, Goodbye

This is a 4-step behaviour expectation when the Therapy Dog is working around the School

- **Approach** – Always walk slowly to the Therapy Dog and Toni or the designated handler. Leaving a classroom or jumping out of a class line are not responsible times to approach a dog. When students approach the Therapy Dog, they need to walk up slowly. This is especially important at recess or lunch where students run from place to place. Another part of this expectation is that the Therapy Dog can only have up to three students with it at one time. If there's already three students around the dog, students need to know they have to wait for someone to leave before their allowed to approach.
- **Ask** – This is a key safety measure both for the dog and the students. Students must ask to pat the Therapy Dog and permission must be granted before they pat it. This ensures that the handler is aware of both the dog's behaviour and the students' actions. We need to reinforce that people (students, siblings, parents, etc.) always need to ask the owner / handler if it's ok to pat the dog.
- **Pat** – For this expectation we discuss that the dog likes to smell a closed hand first and then get scratched under the chin. The dog will be in the sit or down position for greeting children. Students will be encouraged to tell the dog to sit, ensuring it's paying attention to them and is not surprised by having a small hand in its face.
- **Goodbye** – This expectation has been added to keep a line moving. Sometimes, the dog may have a larger group of students who want to say hi. Since only three are allowed around it at a time, we set an expectation that saying hi to the dog is a quick process, if there are others present that would like a turn.

