

School support dog guidelines

This document provides guidelines for the use of dogs in schools. Schools in NSW must follow these guidelines in order to comply with all relevant legislation including the Companion Animals Act, Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act and Animal Research Act. In addition, schools must meet the requirements of their respective sector in relation to financial management and health and safety.

August 2021

1. Overview

The use of dogs to provide emotional support to students in NSW schools has increased significantly in recent years. While there is both scientific and anecdotal evidence to support the use of dogs to provide emotional support to students, their use must be compliant with all Commonwealth, State and school sector requirements. This relates to animal welfare, legal and financial responsibility and health and safety.

This document provides guidelines for the use of dogs in schools. Schools in NSW must follow these guidelines in order to comply with all relevant legislation including the Companion Animals Act, Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act and Animal Research Act. In addition, schools must meet the requirements of their respective sector in relation to financial management and health and safety.

The dogs used in schools to provide emotional support, companionship or well being support are often known as therapy, emotional support or companion dogs. For the purpose of these guidelines, any dog in a school used to support student wellbeing (other than accredited assistance dogs) will be referred to as **school support dogs**.

2. School support dogs

The role of school support dogs is to react and respond to people and their environment, under the guidance and direction of their handler. For example:

- An individual might be encouraged to gently pat or talk to a dog to teach sensitive touch and help them be calm.
- The dog could be used as a non-confronting audience for student reading activities.
- They may be used to provide emotional support through animal assisted therapy which can come in many forms.

School support dogs work with multiple people and are not formally accredited.

It should be noted that many individuals or companies, claim to sell or train therapy, emotional support or companion dogs that are accredited, however there is currently no such recognised accreditation in NSW.

3. Assistance dogs

School support dogs are not the same as assistance dogs that are accredited and specially trained to assist an individual person with a disability. Assistance dogs have undertaken a Public Access Test (PAT) and meet the NSW standards for public access rights. The term assistance dog is the generic term for a guide, hearing, or service dog,

specifically trained to perform identifiable physical tasks and behaviours that assist a person with a disability in order to aid in quality of life and/or independence.

Assistance dogs are covered under many legislative access laws for public access rights when working with their handler who lives with a disability. Assistance dogs are trained to work for a single person and must be accredited.

4. Guidelines

Listed below are the legal, animal welfare and health and safety advice about the use and management of dogs in schools.

4.1 Legal

Under the Companion Animals Act 1998 (NSW), Section 14, dogs are prohibited on school grounds unless the Principal grants permission. Reasons why the Principal may grant permission for a dog to be in a school include:

1. Assistance or Service dogs
2. Farm working dogs
3. Visits by organised groups or programs for school incursions
4. School support dogs.

The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (POCTAA) states that only a person aged 18 years and over can be responsible for a dog.

4.1.1 Assistance dogs

An assistance dog is not an emotional support dog or a school support dog. Assistance dogs are trained and accredited by Assistance Dogs Australia and perform identifiable physical tasks and behaviours to assist a person with a disability in order to aid quality of life and/or independence.

Assistance dogs come with a photo license identification of the dog and details of the handler on the licence.

Assistance dogs are allowed in schools, as long as the responsible handler is over 18. In the circumstance that a child under 18 has an assistance dog (although children under 18 do not generally have assistance dogs), there must be a responsible adult over the age of 18 who is the handler for the dog and present at school to supervise the dog. The school and teacher should not take on this responsibility, and the handler must be a parent or carer aged 18 or over. If this situation does arise, the handler must comply with all working with children requirements.

If the child under the age of 18 requires an assistance dog, they must also provide medical evidence to support their case. As assistance dogs are required for people with a disability, the school should also consider whether declining a request for an assistance dog is a breach of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) and in breach of the Department obligations to make reasonable adjustments for a child with a disability. Schools are required to consult with parents and afford procedural fairness before any decision is made.

If a school receives a request for a child to bring in a dog as an assistance dog for their disability, the Principal should seek legal advice. Public schools should contact NSW Department of Education Legal Services. Independent and Catholic schools should work with their sector organisations.

4.1.2 Farm working dogs

The decision to use a dog for working livestock at a school should be made on a case by case basis. This decision is made by the Principal in consultation with the relevant staff.

A person aged 18 years or older must be present whenever the dog is in the presence of students, off the leash and being used for work. The dog must be provided with a safe place with protection from the wind, sun and rain when it is not working.

4.1.3 Visits by organised groups or programs for school incursions that use dogs

Schools have a duty of care to students and must take reasonable steps to prevent an injury that is foreseeable. Visits by organised groups or programs must only go ahead once it is clear that:

- The program/organised group have public liability insurance and workers compensation insurance.
- The program/organised group have strict guidelines on dogs.
- The school has sighted and retained copies of evidence that the dog is healthy, fully immunised and trained.

Steps to meet duty of care requirements include:

- Completion of a Risk Management Process and Proforma. In the case of a public school, it must be done in line with the Department of Education's Excursion Policy.
- Notification to parents about the program allowing dogs on school site, including date and time.
- Development of a process for children who are allergic to dogs.
- Development of safety procedures and zones where the dogs are not allowed, such as near the canteen.

-
- Ensuring reasonable adjustments are made for children with a disability, in consultation with their parents.

4.1.4 School support dogs

- The following practices must be adhered to ensure all legislative requirements are met:
- Only a person 18 years of age and older can be responsible for the dog.
- The dog's handler (person who is responsible for the dog) must be additional to the classroom teacher whenever a dog is working with a class.
- The dog's handler (person who is responsible for the dog) must have undertaken appropriate dog and handler training and be able to demonstrate appropriate management skills with the dog.
- The dog must be on a leash at all times and supervised by a responsible adult.
- The dog must wear a collar that shows the name of the dog and the address or telephone number of the owner of the dog.
- The dogs must not be within zones used for serving, preparing or consuming food.
- Students should not eat around the dog or feed the dog.
- The Animal Research Authority must be completed by all staff involved in the use of the dog(s). A copy can be accessed at <http://nswschoolanimals.com/compliance/animal-research-authority/>.

4.2 Animal welfare requirements

Schools must identify the purpose of the dog and the justification for having a school support dog. The justification should reflect what the school wants to address by having a school support dog, how the dog is going to be used and what benefits they hope to gain from having a school support dog. The justification is a legal requirement of the Animal Research Act.

Schools need to consider and be clear about:

- the expected outcomes
- the duties of the dog
- ownership of the dog
- responsibilities of the school and the owner.

Dogs are companion animals and need a person to be their owner. The dog may be owned by a staff member or a person external to the school who routinely brings the dog to the school for timetabled interactions with the school community. The dog must not be owned by the school.

As the dog is owned by an individual, it is recommended that the costs associated with the care and management of the dog should be largely met by the owner. The school may agree to assist with the cost of training, ongoing behaviour monitoring and any additional facilities required for the dog at the school, such as a crate for use of the dog when working at the school. These arrangements must be agreed to, recorded and signed by the dog owner and the Principal.

The school community should be informed via the school newsletter or similar mechanism of the use of a school support dog(s) and parents/carers should be able to notify the school of any student with a genuine allergy or fear of dogs.

Any individual school support dog should be on duty at the school for a **maximum of three days in any seven day week**. The days the dog comes to the school are regarded as work days that stimulate and make demands on the animal. This workload must be managed. The school must not be used as a dog minding facility, where a staff member brings their dog to provide them care and companionship. School support dogs must be regarded as carrying out a job.

A record of the days the dog attends the school should be kept and organised.

The dog must be provided with an area where they can rest and have time away from the stimulus of the school through the day and be provided with water.

Copies of the dog's health records, such as vaccination certificates, should be provided to the school and maintained.

Toileting arrangements/cleaning up for the dog must be organised and not be the responsibility of the cleaning contractor.

Advice about appropriate hygiene for students and opportunities for hand washing after handling the dog(s) and before eating food must be made available.

No person other than the adult responsible for the dog should feed the dog while it is at the school.

4.2.1 Selection, suitability and training of School Support dogs

Many individual dogs have the potential to work as school support dogs. Some breeds tend to have more suitability for this role but ultimately it is the individual dog with appropriate temperament and training that is most likely to be a successful dog.

Factors that should be considered when selecting an individual dog to work as a school support dog include:

- allergy rating

-
- size
 - age
 - temperament
 - general characteristics of the particular breed
 - history of the dog
 - training previously completed.

Some breeds of dog, such as poodles, do not shed hair and are considered less likely to produce allergenic reactions in sensitive people. It is important to note however that no breed of dog is considered truly hypoallergenic and for individuals that have severe life threatening allergic reactions, contact should always be avoided.

In general the breeds of dog that tend to be most successful as school support dogs are those with a naturally calm disposition and are at least medium size. The most favourable individuals have been well socialised and have had positive experiences with children and a combination of basic training and training to cope with different situations such as a student becoming aggressive.

It is essential that puppies are not brought into the school until they are fully vaccinated and have attended a puppy school. Once this stage has been completed, they may visit the school for socialisation to complement more specialised training appropriate for working as a school support dog. The process of familiarising them with the school environment should be done slowly and **the training must be supervised by a professional trainer**. See Appendix 1 for notes relating to professional dog trainer qualifications.

It is essential that the puppies are not over exposed to the school environment. It is important to note that puppies experience several fear periods while maturing. These periods need to be taken into account when conducting familiarisation visits.

It is imperative to understand that it is not possible to predict whether a puppy will mature into a dog that is suitable for the role of school support dog. Therefore if a pup is purchased with the intent on raising them to be a school support dog, it must be understood that there is a possibility that the dog may not be suitable once it has reached maturity. It is not possible for breeders to predict outcomes for pups. Any breeder who claims to breed service or therapy dogs is misleading.

All dogs used as school support dogs must be desexed, microchipped and registered with their respective local council.

If a school employs more than one school support dog, measures to manage the compatibility and health of the different dogs must be practised. The decision to provide individual or shared rest areas for multiple dogs should have considered the behavioural needs of individual dogs and health and hygiene practices.

4.2.2 Staff and student training

While the school support dog must have an owner who is the primary handler, it is essential that the whole school staff are given the opportunity to learn about the use of the dog within the school. It may be appropriate for the dog trainer or provider organisation to come to the school on a Staff Development Day and lead a presentation about the program, interacting with the dog and protocols associated with the dog within the school.

Students also need to be given guidance about how to interact with the dog and given clear instruction about not feeding the dog and hygiene procedures after handling the dog and before consuming or handling food. It is essential that students and staff are aware of the risk of transmission of zoonoses and the practices to reduce the risks.

The teacher of any class must not be the only adult present when the school support dog is working with a class. This means that the teacher never has their duty of care to the students compromised. The handler of the dog is present with the teacher and students and may be a support staff member, an executive staff member or an external agency person. The adult handler must be able to remove the dog from the situation if required.

4.2.3 Dog health

The following practices must be adhered to in order to maintain the physical health of the school support dog:

- routine internal and external parasite control as appropriate for the location of the school and in consultation with the local veterinarian. Particular care should be taken to ensure measures for hydatid tapeworms control are incorporated [Tapeworm and hydatid disease](#)
- annual vaccinations
- maintenance of a balanced diet
- daily exercise appropriate for the size and age of the dog
- regular grooming and bathing as appropriate for the breed and climate
- six monthly documented check-up with a veterinarian
- Safe travel to and from school in an appropriate vehicle with appropriate restraints.

The dog's diet must not include scraps from the students. The health of the dog's gastrointestinal tract needs to be maintained by maintaining a diet appropriate for the age and breed of the dog. It is important that the staff and students understand this.

4.2.4 Monitoring of School Support dogs

It is essential that the physical, psychological and behavioural health of the school support dog is monitored by external parties. The physical health can be monitored through a twice a year visit to the veterinarian for a check-up and vaccinations.

The psychological and behavioural health check should be done by the organisation provider or a professional trainer (see Appendix 1). This trainer must visit the dog at the school and observe the dog's behaviour and demeanour while it is working at **least once per year**.

Records from the check-ups must be maintained.

5 Health and Safety

Each school should undertake a risk assessment that includes the following:

- School sector requirements
- Purpose of the dog in the school environment
- Advice provided in these guidelines
- Welfare of the dog in the case of an emergency.

Sample templates of NSW Department of Education risk assessments are available for adaption and use:

- [NSW DoE Safety Risk Assessment and Management Plan – Managing a school support dog](#)
- [NSW DoE Safety Risk Assessment and Management Plan – School support dog.](#)

6 Documentation

The following records or copies must be maintained by the school in relation to the care and management of the school support dog:

- days the dog attends the school
- documents relating to the physical, psychological and behavioural health of the dog, i.e. vaccination, internal and external parasite control, grooming and bathing, outcome of six monthly veterinarian check, outcome of annual NDTF accredited trainer visit
- completed Animal Research Authority
- agreements relating to the ownership of the dog, responsibility for the dog and any school expenditure related to the dog

-
- completed risk assessments
 - completed Working with Children Checks (WWCC) and numbers for dog handlers/owners.

7 Summary of guidelines

- An assistance dog is the generic term for a guide, hearing, or service dog, specifically trained to perform identifiable physical tasks and behaviours that assist a person with a disability in order to aid in quality of life and/or independence. An assistance dog has undertaken a Public Access Test (PAT) and meet the NSW standards for public access rights.
- School support dogs react and respond to people and their environment, under the guidance and direction of their handler. School support dogs work with multiple people and are not formally accredited in NSW.

The follow practices must be adhered to when using a school support dog:

- The purpose of the dog and the justification for having a school support dog must be identified.
- Only a person 18 years of age and older can be responsible for the dog.
- The dog must be owned by a person, not the school.
- All school support dogs must be desexed, microchipped and registered with their respective local council.
- The dog's handler (person who is responsible for the dog) must be additional to the classroom teacher whenever a dog is working with a class.
- The dog must be on a leash at all times and supervised by a responsible adult.
- The dog must wear a collar that shows the name of the dog and the address or telephone number of the owner of the dog.
- The dogs must not be within zones used for serving, preparing or consuming food.
- Students should not eat around the dog or feed the dog.
- The Animal Research Authority must be completed by all staff involved in the use of the dog(s). A copy can be accessed at <http://nswschoolanimals.com/compliance/animal-research-authority/>.
- The school community must be informed of the use of a school support dog.
- Any individual school support dog should be on duty at the school for a maximum of three days in a week.
- The dog must be provided with an area where they can rest and have time away from the stimulus of the school through the day and be provided with water.

-
- Toileting arrangements/cleaning up for the dog must be organised by the school and not be a part of the cleaning contract.
 - Advice about appropriate hygiene for students and opportunities for hand washing after handling the dog(s) and before eating food must be made available.
 - No person other than the adult responsible for the dog should feed the dog while it is at the school.
 - The training of the dog must be supervised by a professional trainer accredited through an organisation as listed in Appendix 1.
 - Staff and students should be given the opportunity to learn about the use of the dog within the school.
 - The physical, psychological and behavioural health of the school support dog must be monitored by external parties each year.
 - Complete records must be maintained about the care and management of the dog in the school in addition to a completed risk assessment.

Appendix 1

Recognised qualifications for professional dog trainers

It is a requirement that every dog used as a School support dog undergoes:

- familiarisation with the school environment, supervised by a professional trainer
- training that is supervised by a professional trainer
- monitoring by a professional trainer at least once per year.

The professional dog trainer must have completed qualifications that have involved:

- Knowledge assessment
- Skills assessment.

Qualifications and organisations that demonstrated this assessment and are recognised for professional trainers for School support dogs include:

- Certificate IV Animal Behaviour and Training
- Certificate III Animal Behaviour and Training (National Dog Trainers Federation)
- Diploma of Canine Behaviour Science and Technology (Companion Animal Sciences Institute)
- Dog Trainer Professional (Karen Pryor Academy)
- Karen Pryor Academy Certified Training Partner (KPA-CTP)
- Certification in Training and Counselling (Jean Donaldson's The Academy)
- Certified Professional Dog Trainer (DPDT)
- Certified Canine Behaviour Consultant (CCBC)
- Delta Institute.

It is the responsibility of the school to obtain evidence that the professional dog trainer supervising the School support dog has completed at least one of the qualifications listed above.