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Risk control

Dogs in Schools



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Dogs in Schools

Introduction

The presence of dogs in schools is becoming increasingly frequent as the potential benefits of children's interaction with pets of all species, but particularly dogs, is more widely recognised and promoted in some quarters¹. The growing popularity of dogs in society also makes it more likely that parents at the school gates will be accompanied by their canine family members and local dog owners may try to utilise school grounds to exercise their pets, without due consideration for the safety or health of others.

These circumstances will undoubtedly introduce risks that will need to be evaluated and appropriately controlled by the schools governors and management team, and it begins with clarifying the reasons and purpose for having dogs on school premises and what is to be gained.

Thought will need to be given to risk assessing what category of dog(s) are being considered for introduction as well as those that may already be present. For example:

- Do some students or staff with disabilities have an **Assistance dog** (sometimes referred to as a 'Service dog') to accompany them and perform specific tasks to help? These dogs and their owners are usually highly trained and qualified by one of the charitable organisations registered as members of Assistance Dogs UK.
- Is there a need for a **Therapy dog**? This is rather a general term often used to describe a dog that is used to benefit people in a therapeutic way. This incorporates quite a wide range of potential activities and an equally wide range of potential people.

Some of these dogs take part in short periodic visits with their volunteer owner / handler to provide educational support opportunities such as the Kennel Club Foundation's 'Bark and Read'² initiative, working with individuals or small groups of children with reading etc. Whilst other dogs take part in more structured activities as part of a therapeutic programme or practice, where a trained therapist/handler will often work with the dog to provide comfort and reassurance to a child who is anxious, withdrawn or lacking self-confidence or who perhaps needs additional emotional or behavioural support following a traumatic life event such as bereavement.

In the UK therapy dogs are not considered to be assistance dogs – this is because an assistance dog is legally permitted to accompany its client, owner, or partner, at all times and in all places. A therapy dog does not have these same legal privileges.

- **School dogs** are becoming quite common particularly in junior schools with the aim of providing a calming or harmonious influence that children (and perhaps sometimes the staff) can focus on to reduce classroom anxiety and stress levels. These dogs are usually owned by one of the staff members and have varying degrees of training.

Develop a Policy

Whatever category of dog is likely to be at the school (including the uninvited ones), management should prepare and deploy a clear policy and guidance for staff, students and possibly visitors to follow that includes the following aspects:

- Purpose, aims and objectives of introducing or permitting dogs.
- Responsibilities of the various groups including owners, handlers, teachers, students and other staff.
- Risk Assessments – Who will conduct, record and review the assessment etc.
- Welfare standards for the dog – What measures are to be established to protect the dog?
- Training and expected behaviour of dogs – What are the acceptable standards?
- Training for Staff and Students – What instructions and information will people receive?
- Parents / visitors with dogs – Do you discourage or apply rules to control?
- Trespassers with dogs – How will this be prevented or managed?
- Hygiene practices and facilities – What equipment and training will be required?
- Reporting of incidents and emergency procedures – Will existing systems work?
- Monitoring and Review of the policy's performance at controlling the risks and taking account of change – When and how will this be done and by whom?
- Adequate insurance cover – for the school and what public liability cover do you expect the owners of dogs coming onto school premises to have?

Assess the Risks

You have to be able to recognise the hazards and risks, and determine which are likely to be significant before you can implement proportionate controls to manage them, so a thorough risk assessment will need to be conducted ideally involving a range of objective individuals.

Like people, no two dogs are the same, although some breeds do display certain characteristics or tendencies which may be favourable, and others that are not. The size and age of a dog and the type of coat it has might be significant factors to consider depending upon available space, age of children and whether anyone within the school population suffer with allergies.

Just because a dog behaves perfectly in their home environment or when out on a busy high street, it is no guarantee that they will continue to exhibit the desired temperament (usually calm and friendly manner and not too boisterous) when placed in a strange, frantic or often noisy school.

Dogs have teeth and they may well use them if they are distressed, feel threatened, trapped or become over excited, but they also bark, lick, chew and hold things in their mouths as part of how they interact with humans. Unfortunately these behaviours can be easily misinterpreted by people who are not familiar with being around dogs, or are even fearful of them.

It should not be overlooked that dogs can also present significant health risks for humans either via parasites or contact with faeces etc.

Probably the most important of all factors to consider is the level of obedience training the dog and handler have received, as ultimately it is the bond between the two and the willingness of the dog to reliably follow instructions that will keep situations under control. However, it is important that obedience is achieved through a reward based approach and not a punishment one. The dogs have got to enjoy and benefit from the interactions with children and the environment they are placed in, otherwise there are serious ethical question to be resolved.

Implement the controls

A carefully considered plan based on the deliberations of the risk assessment will need to be drawn up and implemented if Therapy, Assistance or School dogs are to be successfully integrated into school activities.

This should include:

- Identification and evaluation of a suitable dog, considering:
 - Its age – puppies can be easily stressed and have little stamina, while older dogs may become more intolerant and uneasy when encountering strange environments and noises.
 - Its health condition – does it have regular veterinary check-ups and annual vaccinations, and is it up to date with its programme of worming and flea treatments?
 - Its history of training and socialisation
 - Its temperament - any canine that is skittish, aggressive, fearful, wilful, or stubborn is unlikely to react well in a busy school.
 - Advice from a competent vet and/or animal behaviourist.
- A carefully controlled introduction to the environment for the dog, firstly with no children present and then gradually building up the exposure/duration over a number of site visits before confronting children. The engagement with the children will also need to be gradually developed over an extended period to build up contact time while constantly observing the dog's behaviour for any signs of distress.
- Preparing the staff and students for the dogs arrival and having a clear set of 'rules to follow' supported by a reasoned explanation so everyone knows for example:
 - How and when to approach a dog to avoid crowding or cornering it.
 - When and how to touch a dog to reduce the risk of being nipped.
 - To stay calm, avoid sudden movements and loud noises.
 - What signs and signals in the dog's behaviour might indicate distress etc.
- Supervision of the dog at all times - preferably by the owner.
- Setting and not exceeding time limits (per session/day/week) for participation in activities.
- Provision of a suitable and safe quiet space for the dog to relax and rest between sessions in contact with the children.
- Controlling the climate to ensure the dog does not overheat (they can't regulate their temperatures as well as humans), and making drinking water available at all times for the dog, but being mindful of the slip and trip risks this could introduce.
- Cleaning and personal hygiene standard that need to be employed.
- Arrangements for the dog to take regular toilet breaks and exercise in a suitable outside place designated for this purpose.

The Kennel Club have developed a comprehensive set of 'Standards of Practice for Providers of Animal Assisted Interventions in Schools'⁴ that will provide you with further guidance on creating an environment where both dogs and humans are adequately protected and can benefit from each other.

Controls for visiting, stray or trespassing dogs:

- Prepare and periodically communicate to parents and guardians explaining your schools policy about bringing family/pet dogs to the school, ensuring a consistent message is on the school website and covered with new parents and children at induction to the school.
- Securely fence school fields / grounds where possible. If not consider a grounds inspection process prior to use for PE or break time activities that includes checking and removing any dog fouling.
- Have an emergency plan for dealing with stray or aggressive dogs that are loose on school grounds that prioritises the safeguarding of students, but also avoids staff taking unnecessary personal risks and confrontation with owners or their animals.
- Have a procedure for reporting stray or trespassing dogs and their owners that includes the relevant contact details and avoids any delay in summoning assistance. The local authority's environmental services team will usually have responsibility for dealing with strays and issues of dog fouling which can include displaying notices and the issuing of fixed penalty notices. Your local dog refuge or RSPCA shelter may also be able to offer assistance with strays.
- Trespassing without causing damage is a civil matter, but contacting the police on 101 will usually bring a response when it is known to be on school grounds.

Insurance

In most cases having dogs in schools is unlikely to affect your schools insurance arrangements providing you have taken reasonable steps to assess and manage the risks. Some insurers may ask that you inform them of the presence of dogs and the type of activity they are involved in.

Responsible dog owners should also take out public liability insurance for the third party risks their animals may create, but it is not mandatory in the UK. Some pet health insurance policies may include a level of public liability insurance, but you should check the terms, conditions and exclusions and inform the insurer if your dog is regularly attending school as cover may not extend fully to this environment.

Conclusions

While there are lots of studies and examples that dogs can have beneficial effects on the health and wellbeing of humans, it is not universally accepted⁶ that this makes it justified for us to use animals in this way, when there may be alternative strategies that can be employed to alleviate the issues within schools. So it is incumbent on owners and school management to ensure the dogs welfare remains the primary concern.

References

- 1 <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-47655600>
- 2 [Bark and Read | Charity work | The Kennel Club](#)
- 3 [Good Advice - Dogs for Good](#)
- 4 [bark-and-read-standards-of-practice.pdf \(thekennelclub.org.uk\)](#)
- 5 [school dogs.pdf \(dogstrust.org.uk\)](#)

Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

Get in touch

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