



PAW-TRAIT *of an* EDUCATION

*A higher level Teaching Assistant from York was in the news recently, after winning a two-year battle to convince her school's Headteacher and Governors to allow her to bring a canine colleague into school. **Lisa Botwright** investigates the rise in school dogs, and asks if they're an adorable distraction, or an educational asset?*



WHEN CHILDREN ARRIVE at Mandeville Primary School, St Albans, every morning, they're greeted not only by their teachers, but also by another very special member of the school team. This individual is not so much a teacher – she's more of a friend, counsellor, confidante and playmate. She's also more likely to bark her hello, accompanied by lots of excited tail-wagging. Molly is a gorgeous buff-coloured cockapoo with silky ears, and she's the school dog. As Safiya, a Year 6 pupil, says, "I like that Molly is always at the front gate at the start of the day so that people dropping us off can see our school dog that we are proud to have."

At the moment, the Department for Education has no idea how many dogs currently work in classrooms and does not require schools to register; nor is any extra insurance needed. "We took the plunge after talking about it for nearly a year," explains Head Cathy Longhurst. "I was concerned about policies and logistics, but, in fact, it was a relative breeze."

The idea was initially broached by Deputy Head Laura Williams, who was keen to have her own dog and felt sure that if she shared her pet with the school, it would bring huge benefits to the pupils. "We're an open-minded leadership team, which means sticking our necks out, but only when it's in the interests of the children. We knew that the risks were high, that it's a huge long term commitment, and that if it didn't work out then a lot of children would be disappointed."

They were also keen to include the children themselves in the initial decision, and held

Left: Mandeville Primary's school dog, Molly – a gorgeous buff-coloured cockapoo. Above: Fernie, a DHK Certified Attending School Dog, with pupils from Winford Primary School, Somerset © Dogs Helping Kids

At the command to 'snuggle', [the dog] lays her head down on each of the children's laps in turn and raises her big brown eyes to their face, gazing adoringly at them as they read.

a whole school referendum ('ruff-erendem', smiles Laura). The 'yes' vote was – unsurprisingly – almost unanimous. “She’s been such a fantastic addition to the school,” enthuses Laura. “We didn’t think there was a gap, but there was. Now we feel complete.”

Molly seems to thrive on the stimulation and positive interaction her role brings. She lives at home with Laura who officially ‘owns’ her, and then comes into school with her every day. “Molly is so happy to be here, and she definitely misses the children in the school holidays.”

As a puppy, Molly’s introduction to school life was a process

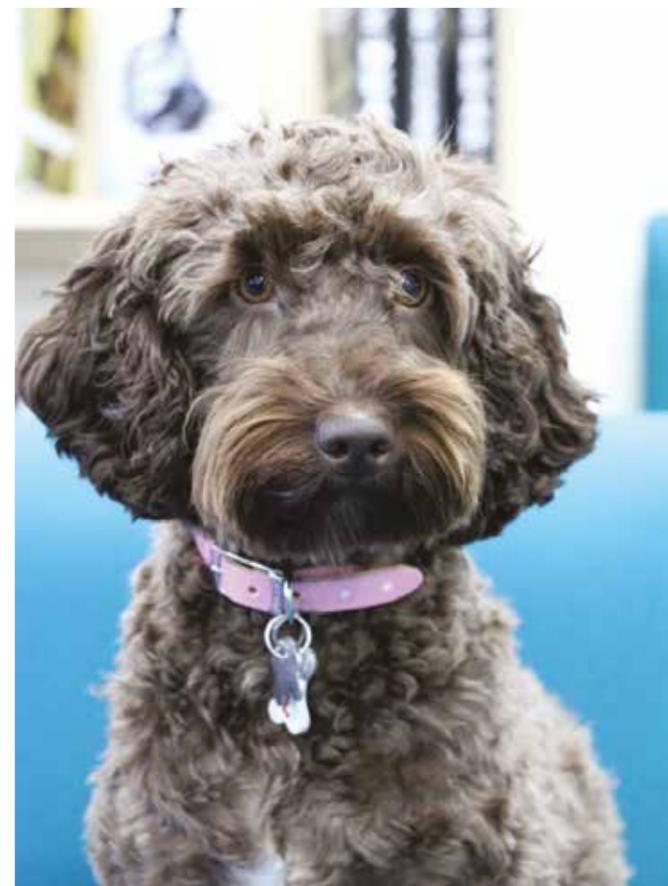
of gradual acclimatisation. At the same time, she was also receiving training from Gretta Ford, an animal behaviourist and dog trainer, whose former occupation as a teacher (she was Deputy Head of a local primary school) made her exceptionally well-placed to understand the specific needs of Molly’s own education.

Now seven months old, Molly’s days are getting busier. Along with welcoming pupils in the morning, accompanied by a senior member of staff, she spends time with individual children – to calm a child who is upset, or to reward a child who’s been kind or worked particularly well – as well as visiting groups of children (never more than three at a time) in classrooms. Laura eventually intends to build regular canine sessions into the timetable.

Molly’s puppy presence can be a balm for children with low self-esteem, or with significant educational needs. “We had a Year 6 boy with autism, whose potentially challenging behaviour decreased almost immediately after Molly joined us,” says Cathy. She also tells me about a little girl in Reception who had been mute since Nursery. Staff were stunned when she began speaking to Molly in full sentences.

Cathy explains that only children with parental permission can spend time with the dog, and stress that Molly is never left alone with a child under any circumstances. Common-sense rules to keep both Molly and the children safe are cheerfully drummed into the pupils: rules such as ‘never feed the dog’ or ‘never stare into the dog’s eyes’ (this can sometimes be interpreted as a threat).

“Her presence has had a huge impact on staff morale too, which was something we didn’t anticipate. She’s therapy for



Left: The Reach Free School’s dog, Scout.



everyone.” Are there any downsides at all? I ask Cathy, and she pauses to reflect a moment. “The only challenge is that staff can no longer leave sandwiches in their cubby holes.”

Staff and children at The Reach Free School in Watford are also endearingly proud of their school pooch. “My friends in other schools say I’m lucky and wish they could have a dog too,” one twelve year old girl tells me. Their dog, Scout, is another cockapoo, this time with a beautiful chocolate coat, who belongs to the school’s Deputy Head, Natalie Simpson.

I’ve been invited to come along to an after-school class in order to meet Scout: an ‘elective’, where a small group of children teach her tricks and learn about training animals. It may be an optional class, but Natalie tells me that almost every single child in the school is clamouring for a place. Only ten children are selected each half term, so these pupils feel they’re the lucky ones. “I was so happy and excited when I found out, I nearly cried,” says one child passionately.

I observe the class’s star attraction patiently following the children up and down the room as they encourage and entice her through a dazzling array of *Britain’s Got Talent*-type tricks – although who’s teaching whom is often a little hazy. To wind down towards the end of the class, the children sit on the floor

and take it in turns to read a passage of a book out-loud to Scout, who’s named after the book-loving character in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Some of the children are reluctant readers, and stumble a little over unfamiliar words, but Scout doesn’t judge or correct. At the command to ‘snuggle’, she lays her head down on each of their laps in turn and raises her big brown eyes to their face, gazing adoringly at them as they read. “Scout is very smart and she teaches me patience,” confides one young member of the group. One of the children also tells me that he found dogs scary before. “Now I’m not nervous at all,” he says proudly.

As a teacher in a previous role, Natalie had visited Jamie’s Farm – a charity that helps vulnerable children in challenging urban schools by combining farming with support and therapy – and she had seen first-hand how animals can magically transform children’s lives. The Reach is a relatively new school and Natalie joined at its inception; she felt this was the perfect time to bring a school dog into the mix, since only parents who bought into the concept would wish to send their children. Natalie feels the dog has a powerful effect on the social and emotional well-being of the children: “Those who are reluctant to talk become more open.” And also on their

Above: Max – a Trainee Attending School Dog who works at a Primary School in Somerset © Dogs Helping Kids

motivation to learn: "Scout is now an integral part of school life," she concludes.

Tracey Berridge is the founder of Dogs Helping Kids (DHK), a charity based in Devon, and it's her desire to get specially trained dogs into every school and library in the UK. As a little girl, she was inspired by an American 1970s book called *Skeezzer: Dog with a Mission*, a true story about a canine co-therapist working in a hospital for emotionally disturbed young people. "I knew straightaway that when I grew up, I wanted to train dogs to help children."

With single-minded tenacity, Tracey opened a training and behaviour centre for dogs and also studied for a Masters in Animal Behaviour Counselling, so that she had both the

practical skills and academic underpinning to realise her ambition. Crucially though, Tracey believes that a dog should only be working with a child or teenager in an educational environment if it has been trained, assessed and certified to do so: "The outcome of having a school dog can be amazing; but the slippside is that things can go horribly wrong," she cautions.

DHK-trained school dogs have to pass six assessments over two years to demonstrate that they have the right impeccable temperament to work with children. Some dogs work with volunteers to visit schools and work with small groups of children; some – like Scout, who is a 'DHK dog' – are classed as 'attending school dogs' and will normally be owned by a member of the school staff or the head teacher. Some dogs will

accompany DHK staff on educational talks in schools and colleges, and some are trained as one-to-one support dogs to help teenagers (and occasionally younger children) through difficult times in their lives.

To illustrate this particular category of DHK dogs, Tracey tells me about a lad called Liam, whom she met when his mother, Rachael, brought the family's new puppy, Charlie, to her training school. After suffering a traumatic event, Liam had become severely depressed and was diagnosed with PTSD. "He'd got to the stage where he didn't want to go to school and very rarely left the house," Tracey explains. When Rachael confided, in great distress, that Liam had reached a very low point, Tracey was moved to try and help. She felt that Charlie had the right temperament to be able to calm and comfort Liam, and in 2012 started training him up as the first DHK Personal Support Dog to work with a vulnerable child. The results were remarkable. "Liam is now 18 years old and is Teen Advisor for the charity," Tracey says proudly. "He credits Charlie completely for turning his life around."

The charity gets hundreds of enquiries, but they only have around 60 or so dogs out there at the moment, because it takes so long to train them. "Some people phone up and expect to be able to order a dog for the new term, as if they're a desk or computer, rather than a sentient being who needs love and a good home," says Tracey. She insists that teachers (or anyone else who's similarly interested) come along to one of her one-day workshops – as Natalie did – at the very earliest stage of researching the idea, so that they're aware of all the relevant issues. The right canine connection is shown to increase academic engagement in school, and boost children's social skills and self-esteem. In extreme cases of troubled or abused children, dogs are shown to teach children empathy, non-violence, love and patience. "Some children have never known this," Tracey says sadly.

If you're still unconvinced, I'll leave you with this paw-fect endorsement from eleven year old Beth, a pupil at Mandeville Primary. "Molly brings joy to the school wherever she goes and always brings a smile to our minds when she walks past us." ●

Liam credits Charlie completely for turning his life around



Liam with Charlie – the first DHK support dog to work with a vulnerable child © Dogs Helping Kids

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