

Dogs and children do mix!

One organisation is working to show the positive impact dogs can have on youngsters. Rachael Buzzel finds out more.

You've heard of the old adage "Never work with children and animals"? Well, that's never occurred to Tracey Berridge, founder of North Devon-based organisation Dogs Helping Kids.

"Dogs have such an amazing impact on children and really enhance their lives," she said. "In the past, many people have said dogs and children wouldn't work, but I'm proving them wrong — dogs can improve children's education so much, and really improve their behaviour.

"The tide is turning — people are slowly realising what a positive force for change dogs can be on children."

It was in our December 2008 issue that we first met Tracey, who outlined DHK's role in North Devon College's programme Learning Access. Designed for students

excluded from mainstream education, who have behavioural, emotional, or social problems, Tracey ran a course as part of the programme which taught teenagers how to train dogs responsibly, and in turn become better citizens themselves. Kind training methods reinforced the importance of non-violence to the teenagers, built their confidence, and taught them respect and empathy. The year-long courses ran for five years, until funding ran out.

"It's great to see the teenagers involved in the Learning Access courses out at work now they've grown up," said Tracey. "I see one lad, Jordon, who was particularly challenging; now, he's really polite and happy to see me. It's amazing to notice the difference the charity, and the dogs, had on these youngsters' lives."

Back to the classroom

Now, the organisation has finally been recognised as a charitable trust. Its ethos of educating, helping, and supporting children and teenagers of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities is paramount to its latest scheme, School Dogs. While the Learning Access courses were aimed purely at problem teenagers, the charity's focus has now widened out to children of all ages.

Tracey's aim is to use highly trained dogs in schools to teach children the importance of respect, kindness, and responsibility.

"I passionately believe that dogs are amazing animals and they can help to reach children in ways that people can't — they can change the course of a child's future, in a positive way," Tracey said. The School Dogs scheme provides highly trained dogs to work in schools as educational and therapeutic aids.

Having dogs in the school environment is proven to have a variety of positive impacts on children, including improving



Tracey with some of the dogs currently training for the School Dogs scheme, and their owners.



Tracey Berridge and her dog Laya.

academic achievements, increasing literacy skills, calming behaviour, increasing social skills and confidence, teaching respect and responsibility, and preventing truancy.

The charity currently has 14 dogs in training, with the aim of placing them in schools from this month (January). Tracey said: "Once these 14 dogs have passed their assessments, I'd like to have another 10 to 15 dogs in training. It's a slow process, as training takes a year for each dog, but it's vital that their training is successful so it can't be rushed.

"Being a trainer and behaviourist means I can view pups in my classes and earmark them as potential School Dogs; once they pass the advanced training classes I'll approach their owners and gauge their interest in becoming volunteers for the charity."

Once the dogs have been trained, they can work in three different areas: visiting a range of schools on a regular basis; attending one specific school most days of the week, normally owned by a member of staff; or accompanying DHK staff to educational talks in schools and colleges. Their roles can vary from sitting quietly in class while children study, calming them simply with their presence; sitting with one or a group of children in reading sessions; playing and interacting with high-performing children as rewards; and specially trained therapy dogs, working on a one-to-one basis with bullied, abused, or dog-phobic children.

"I'm in talks with about 10 schools about implementing the School Dogs scheme; these range from primary schools and colleges, to behavioural schools for autistic children," continued Tracey.

"The owners of the dogs in training will be taking them to the schools; I'll accompany them to start with, and will then assess the dogs after a year. The owners are helping spread the message and get different schools involved. One



The charity aims to show the positive impact dogs can have on children.

volunteer, whose now grown-up son had ADHD, has asked his former school to take part in the scheme, as a way of giving back what they put in to him.

"Several other dog owners have got in contact with me asking if their pets could be involved with the scheme; although the charity's efforts focus on the dogs we're training at the moment, I'd certainly consider other dogs who prove to be positively trained, and capable of the work. People think it's easy for a dog to sit quietly in the corner of a classroom, but it's not; it takes a certain type of dog, who's

been highly trained, who can really make a difference to children.

"At the moment we're focusing on North Devon, but I've had interest from South Devon and also Cornwall. If someone got in contact from another part of the country I'd try to help them too — my long-term ambition is for the charity to become nationwide. It's a big vision, but why not? Big things grow from the littlest things.

"If we improve the life of just one child, if we improve just one child's behaviour, then it's worth it."

"I passionately believe that dogs are amazing animals and they can help to reach children in ways that people can't."

Future goals

The next big aim for DHK is to gain full charity status. "We're a charitable trust, but we're now working on the next step which is to become a registered charity, which means we will get a charity number," Tracey said. "We need to raise £5,000. We're very proud to have been picked as 'North Devon Journal's' chosen charity and our joint appeal Waggy Tails, Calmer Minds has helped us raise £2,000 so far.

"In the future I'd love to be able to employ fundraisers and dog trainers. But I can't progress any further without charitable funds."

Tracey also hopes that the success of the scheme will change public opinion of dogs. "There's so much bad press about dogs these days," she said. "But they can have such a positive impact on children; I hope the scheme helps improve the public's perception of the good that dogs can do."



Some of the teens helped by the charity.