



Making a "Paws"itive Impact "Fur" Our Students

Toni Victoria Spell

Professional School Counseling

University of North Carolina at Pembroke



What are School Therapy Dogs?

School therapy dogs:

- Are trained to use their social instincts & learned social skills to provide health, social-emotional, & cognitive benefits (Mulvahill, 2019)
- Work with their owners to perform a vital service & allow students in schools to spend time cuddling & interacting with a furry friend (Coast, 2021)
- Have to go through certain types of training that focuses on their temperament & relationship with their owner
- Once certified, they may begin their journey of helping others
- Can help to reduce stress & anxiety among students (and staff), improve attendance, help teach social skills, increase confidence in reading, & encourage students to talk about their emotions (Scott County Schools, 2019)

Michael Batista, senior administrator at the Office of Counseling Support Programs reports that school counselors & social workers are encouraged to use therapy dogs in individual & small group sessions for crisis intervention, bereavement assistance, & behavioral de-escalation.

Evidence-based Practice:

- Research supports the assistance of therapy dogs in the following ways:
 - Lowers peoples blood pressure & stress levels
 - Increases levels of dopamine & serotonin
 - Improves physical well-being
 - Decreases anxiety
 - Dramatically increases positive mood
 - Eases social isolation & helps children learn social skills
 - Helps young readers gain confidence (PAWS for People, 2021)
- Studies on human-animal interaction has found the following benefits:
 - Improvement of social attention, behavior, interpersonal interaction, & mood
 - Reduction of stress-related factors
 - Reduction of self-reported fear & anxiety
 - Improvement of physical & mental health, especially cardiovascular health (Beetz et al., 2012, p. 13)



Jaye Murray, executive director of the Office of Counseling Support Programs states, "Lots of times, young people can see in an animal what they can't see in their classmates. They express a certain kind of empathy, understanding, & compassion that might be difficult at other times due to different things going on in their lives."

Benefits of Having a Therapy Dog in the Classroom

- **Physical benefits:**
 - Interaction with therapy dogs has shown to reduce blood pressure, provide physical stimulation & assist with pain management (Coast, 2021)
- **Social benefits:**
 - Can promote greater self-esteem & focused interaction with other students & teachers (Coast, 2021)
 - Dogs are friendly companions & good listeners who make no judgement
 - Children can easily connect with dogs, helping them feel more confident, which leads to less aggression & negative behavior (Mulvahill, 2019)
 - Interacting with a therapy dog can serve as a "social catalyst", which leads to increased stimulation of social behavior
 - These relationships can help build trust & trustworthiness in children, which can help them develop empathy (Beetz et al., 2012)
- **Cognitive benefits:**
 - Can stimulate memory & problem-solving skills (Coast, 2021)
 - Can improve students' reading skills, stimulates memory & problem-solving skills, & optimizes executive-functioning skills (Alliance of Therapy Dogs, 2020)
- **Emotional & Mental Benefits:**
 - A therapy dog can heighten moods in the classroom, often provoking laughter (Coast, 2021) as well providing significant anti-stress effects on the body (Beetz et al., 2012)
 - Can offer friendship & a shoulder for students to lean on (Coast, 2021)
 - Dogs can calm kids down when they are upset & they help keep their anxiety down (Mulvahill, 2019)

Concerns of Dogs in School

- **Cleanliness**
In order to prevent the spread of disease & infection, students should wash their hands before & after interacting with the dogs (Mulvahill, 2019).
- **Allergies**
Owners can:
 - Bathe & groom their therapy dogs routinely before visiting schools, which reduce animal dander (Mulvahill, 2019)
 - Call parents of students with a pet or dander allergy listed on their health record
 - Keep the dog's environment & equipment clean (vest, collars, leashes)
 - Use anti-dander spray
 - Accommodate by meeting with students in a different location; crate dog during sessions; or vacuum office beforehand (Loveland Public Schools, 2018)
- **Fear**
Owners are extremely cautious about introducing students to their dogs on a voluntary basis. Watching other students enjoying & safely interacting with the dog could encourage a fearful child to give it a try (Mulvahill, 2019)

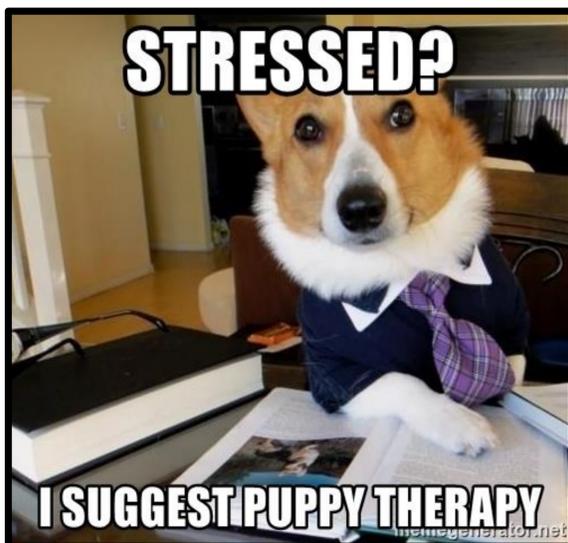


Children with Autism

Researchers have reported that children with autism are more social when playing with therapy dogs as opposed to toys. This offers proof that animals can also have a therapeutic effect (Coast, 2021).



STRESSED?



Reading with Dogs

Elementary, middle, & high schools across the nation have implemented programs that pair students with trained canine reading buddies.

-A study conducted by the University of California announced that students who engaged in this program increased their reading fluency 12-30% (4 Paws Learning & Wellness Center & Vet. Medicine Extension, 2020).

Helping Students with Tragedy & Trauma

Therapy dogs were among the first responders used at the aftermath of the school shootings of Sandy Hook Elementary School and the Virginia Tech campus. Students, parents, and staff members said that petting the dogs helped comfort them and gave them relief from their sadness (Alliance of Therapy Dogs, 2020). They have been used to assist with grief therapy after the death of a student, staff member, or parent (McKibben, 2018, p. 3).



Training Agencies & Programs

Experts recommend using a safe, reliable agency that carefully selects & properly trains their animals:

- Pet Partners (<https://petpartners.org/>)
- Alliance of Therapy Dogs (<https://www.therapydogs.com/>)
- R.E.A.D.—Reading Education Assistance Dogs (<http://www.therapyanimals.org/R.E.A.D.html>)
- AKC's S.T.A.R. Puppy (<https://www.akc.org/products-services/training-programs/canine-good-citizen/akc-star-puppy/>)
- Canine Good Citizen Program (<https://www.akc.org/products-services/training-programs/canine-good-citizen/>)
- Multi-i-grees (<https://education.muttigrees.org/>)
- Pawsibilities Unleashed (<https://www.pawsibilitiesunleashed.org/>)

References

- 4 Paws Learning and Wellness Center & Veterinary Medicine Extension. (2020). *Canine buddies help youth develop reading skills*. 4 Paws Center. http://www.4pawscenter.org/images/pdf/readers-Canine_Buddies.pdf
- Alliance of Therapy Dogs. (2020). *Benefits of therapy dogs in classrooms and on college campuses*. Alliance of Therapy Dogs Inc. <https://www.therapydogs.com/therapy-dogs-classrooms-campus/>
- Beetz, A., Uvnäs-Moberg, K., Julius, H., & Kotrschal, K. (2012). Psychosocial and psychophysiological effects of human-animal interactions: The possible role of oxytocin. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 3, 12–24. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00234>
- Coast, D. (2021). *Therapy dog / 5 ways therapy dogs can help kids*. Alliance of Therapy Dogs Inc. <https://www.therapydogs.com/ways-therapy-dogs-can-help-kids/>
- Loveland Public Schools. (2018). *School therapy dogs*. School Therapy Dogs. <https://www.schooltherapydogs.org/>
- McKibben, S. (2018). Why schools are going to the dogs. *ASCD Education Update*, 60(2), 1–5. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education-update/feb18/vol60/num02/Why-Schools-Are-Going-to-the-Dogs.aspx>
- Mulvahill, E. (2019). *Dogs in the classroom improve SEL, cognitive, and even reading skills*. We Are Teachers. <https://www.weareteachers.com/dogs-in-the-classroom/>
- PAWS for People. (2021). *Benefits of pet therapy*. <https://www.pawsforpeople.org/who-we-are/benefits-of-pet-therapy/>
- Scott County Schools. (2019). *Therapy dog program*. <https://counselorjohnson.Com/Therapy-Dog-Program>. <https://counselorjohnson.com/therapy-dog-program>

