



Wellbeing Dog Guidelines

Rationale

St Michael's is committed to promoting the wellbeing of all students and a wellbeing dog may be used to assist with this. The initiative to introduce a Wellbeing Dog Program is to enhance the pastoral services currently offered within the school.

The key aim of the Wellbeing Dog Program is to promote empathy and wellbeing amongst young people who may be experiencing difficulties with their mental health and wellbeing, trauma, separation, grief and loss, and family and domestic violence. In particular the wellbeing dog aims to:

- Provide comfort and support to young people who are experiencing high levels of distress
- Facilitate communication between the student and dog handler
- Facilitate the development of the therapeutic relationship.

Purpose

The aim is to use the wellbeing dog as a companion for young people across a range of settings, including one-on-one and group settings. The wellness dog's purpose is to support students' well-being, promote a sense of belonging at school, reduce stress and anxiety, and facilitate learning. A wellness dog is one of many strategies that we can draw upon in order to reduce the level of anxiety in students. Within the one-on-one setting the wellbeing dog accompanies students when they may be discussing emotionally provoking information with the wellbeing dog handler such as the social worker, teacher or education assistant. Within the group setting, the wellbeing dog may be trialled in the classroom context with the goal of comforting students with mental health difficulties. The wellbeing dog could also attend larger group events with the goal of identifying and supporting students with mental health difficulties.



Guiding Principles for Practice

1. Research Based Practice

Research suggests animals can assist the therapeutic setting in the following ways:

- Teach empathy and appropriate interpersonal skills
- Help individuals develop social skills
- The relationship between therapy animals and the therapist can be a model for a healthy relationship
- The presence of animals is soothing and can more quickly build the therapeutic relationship for children, adolescents and adults
- Patting an animal has been demonstrated to lower blood pressure, lower anxiety and lessen stress
- It has been shown that animals have the potential to lower human anxiety by simply being present
- Using animals in discussions and skill development is potentially less threatening than working only with human interactions, while also providing practice for how participants may behave in their human-to-human relationships (see Lambin, 2014).

2. The work with animals also has the potential for children to promote:

- Healing and wellbeing through the calming, accepting and responsive nature of small animals; and
- Self-esteem through the skills and responsibility gained in regard to caring and handling animals.

3. Health and Safety

The school is committed to the implementation of a Wellbeing Dog Program in a safe and supervised manner. Infection and injury risk management strategies include:



- Careful dog selection
- Regular grooming of the animal to reduce the risk of allergic reaction
- Selecting a well-trained and well-behaved dog to minimize the risk of animal bites and/or injuries, as indicated by completion of puppy training
- Obtaining information from staff and students in regard to allergies through medical information collection upon enrolment. If required, a list of any children/staff who are anaphylactic will kept by the Senior First Aid staff members
- Proof of vaccinations are provided to the school.
- Regular health checks of the dog with documentation provided to the school as required, to maintain infection control.
- If the wellbeing dog is unfit to attend the school due to illness etc., contact will be postponed until the animal has fully recovered.

4. Hygiene is essential for all participants:

- Hand sanitiser is available in all classrooms for all students and staff
- Students will receive training and regular reminders on the importance of washing their hands after touching the wellbeing dog
- The handler will wash their hands with soap after toileting the wellbeing dog and disposing of soiled or dirty towels or bags, using soap and hand sanitiser

5. Animal Welfare

The school has a responsibility for maintaining the dog's health and wellbeing through the following strategies:

- Sessions are conducted in an area that is suitable for both the student and the wellbeing dog
- Provide the wellbeing dog with fresh food, drink and appropriate shelter and nurturing
- Keep and maintain animal records



- Where possible, the handler will toilet the animal in designate areas at the school in a safe and clean manner whilst cleaning up after the animal. Should the animal toilet in an undesignated area, the area will be disinfected as required
- The wellbeing dog must not be left alone with a student
- The wellbeing dog must be removed from group settings if it becomes distressed
- The wellbeing dog must wear a collar or harness while working.

6. Training Process

The school recognises that training for a new wellbeing dog puppy may take 1-2 years before the wellbeing dog is accredited. The wellbeing dog will attend the school on the rostered days as per the agreement with the principal. To ensure that there is accountability during this process:

- A wellbeing dog in training is not expected to perform to the level of an accredited dog
- Relevant students are informed that the wellbeing dog is in training
- The wellbeing dog will participate in and supply certificates of completion for “puppy school training”
- Upon completion of accreditation, certificates will be provided to the school.

Definitions

Mental Health

According to the World Health Organisation, Mental health is defined as “a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”



Wellbeing

Wellbeing is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy.” It can also be understood as “how people feel and how they function, both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole” (New Economics Foundation, 2012).

Wellbeing Dog

A wellbeing dog refers to a dog that has been trained for the purpose of promoting wellbeing, for example by providing a calming presence.

Owner

The Owner refers to the individual that is caring for the wellbeing dog outside of school hours.

Handler

The handler refers to individual/s who is/are able to look after the wellbeing dog at the school. These individuals must be aware of the wellbeing dog’s commands and requirements to ensure the safe and effective use of the wellbeing dog.

Wellbeing Dog Procedures

Dog Attendance

The dog may attend school at the discretion of the Owner, in communication with the principal and relevant Handler/s.

Dog Handling

Dog Handlers must be agreed upon by the Owner. The Handler is responsible with caring for and utilising the wellbeing dog when it is in their care. Handlers will be trained and fully aware of the wellbeing dog’s commands and will comply with the Wellbeing Dog Guidelines.



Therapeutic Setting

Within the therapeutic setting, the wellbeing dog must wear a collar or harness. The goal is for the wellbeing dog to sit or lay with the Handler and student, or on their mat in a designated area.

Group Settings

Within group settings, the wellbeing dog aims to assist with identifying and supporting students with mental health difficulties. As the management of allergies is more difficult in a group setting, the Handler should initially ask groups if they would like to pet the wellbeing dog and whether there are any allergies prior to approaching a group. For students who approach the dog there is implied consent to pet the wellbeing dog and it is the responsibility of the student to not approach the dog if they have allergies or are fearful of dogs.

Group settings may include, but is not limited to, recess, lunch and events. For on-campus events the Handler must request permission from the event coordinator to bring the wellbeing dog to the event, and for the preferred time and duration, and vice versa.

For off-campus school events, the event coordinator must request the wellbeing dog's attendance from the Owner. The Owner must be present at all off-campus school events.

Classroom Visits

Within the classroom setting, the wellbeing dog aims to comfort students with mental health difficulties. Initially, prior to entering the classroom, the Handler must check with the class teacher and students for any allergies and take appropriate steps to minimise health risks to students, for example, by not attending the classroom or having students meet the wellbeing dog outside the classroom. The Handler will request permission from the classroom teacher to bring the wellbeing dog into the classroom and for the preferred time and duration.



Health and Wellbeing of the Dog

Illness or Injury Off-Campus

There may be times when the wellbeing dog is unwell or injured. If the wellbeing dog is unwell or injured contact should be postponed until it has fully recovered. It is the responsibility of the Owner to notify the Handler/s that the wellbeing dog will be absent from the school at this time.

It is at the discretion of the Owner to decide whether the wellbeing dog needs to attend the vet. If the wellbeing dog does attend the vet, the Owner should provide documentation received, if any, to the school.

Injury at School Events

If the wellbeing dog is injured at school, a first aid report will need to be completed and placed in the wellbeing dog's administration file. This first aid report may be required for any insurance claims made.

The Handler must inform the Owner of the injury. The Owner will take the wellbeing dog to the vet and provide all receipts and relevant documentation, if any, to the school. All costs due to injury on school grounds will be covered by the school.

Provision of Food, Water and Shelter

It is the responsibility of the Handler to provide appropriate food, water and shelter to the wellbeing dog. The wellbeing dog must have access to clean water, their mat, and portioned food. These may be strategically located in frequented offices, such as the school social worker's office, administration or the finance manager's office.

The wellbeing dog is not to eat food offered by staff or students unless approval has been given by the Handler. During interactions, the Handler should encourage students and staff not to feed the wellbeing dog food.



Toileting

Toileting the wellbeing dog must be done in a way that ensures hygiene is maintained for the Handler and wider community. The wellbeing dog is not toileted in common seating areas for students. An arrangement is made between the Handler and their Line Manager to identify designated areas for toileting. To ensure that the designated toileting areas do not become unhygienic, the toileting areas must be reticulated, and the Handler is encouraged to alternate locations throughout the day. All dog excrement will be collected and disposed of by the Handler, using compostable bags in the FOGO bin.

Dog Training

The wellbeing dog may engage in off-campus and on-campus training across their lifespan. All training must follow a positive reinforcement model, with no punitive measures used. Off-campus training may involve local puppy school or a one-on-one trainer. Certificates of completion must be provided to the school for their records. Where a certificate may not be provided, for example one-on-one training, receipts or other documentation should be provided to the school to ensure accurate records of the wellbeing dog's completed training.

On-campus training may involve using positive reinforcement to encourage desired behaviours. It is at the discretion of the Handler to decide when this training should take place and to provide the positive reinforcement to the wellbeing dog.