



Policy Document for My Canine Companion (MCC) Therapy dogs in schools

Please find attached in the documents the full risk assessment for MCC School Therapy dogs in school.

The policy for School Therapy Dogs

November 2024

Rationale

There is an increasing body of research to support the benefit of a dog in school. MCC have placed therapy dogs in schools around Ireland providing comfort and reassurance to students with anxiety and self-confidence issues. Dogs have proven to increase the wellbeing of staff and students. ***“School Therapy dogs, they simply put a smile on your face”***. They are an additional resource for the school that benefit students and staff

Increasingly in schools, it is becoming recognised that students' emotional wellbeing is at the root of positive behaviour and success with socialising as well as in the classroom.

A dog can support students who are anxious about school and could be the reason that they want to come in every morning. Dogs can be beneficial to assist students with difficulty transitioning into the school. Reading to dogs can help boost students' confidence and fluency. Caring for an animal can teach students responsibility and how to treat animals safely and with compassion.

Dogs are great fun to have around and can bring a caring atmosphere to a school.

Preparations for having an MCC School Dog

School leaders have taken advice from My Canine Companion (MCC), who provide training and guidance about the necessary risk assessments and insurance must be in place, as well as practical guidance.

Sarah Allen (Principal), Niamh Loakman (SNA), Eithne Frahill (SNA) and Holy Family Secondary School undertake training to ensure they are competent in handling the dog, they will also receive training and guidance in dog behaviour enabling them to understand the dog's temperament. The handler(s) will remove the dog to its designated chill-out zone if the dog shows any signs of stress during interactions. MCC instructor will be notified.

Toilet area is designated within the school grounds away from the students' access/play areas.

A designated chill-out zone will be in place for the dog before its placement in school, this will be agreed by the handler in consultation with MCC instructor.

Parent(s) will be informed that MCC dog will become part of the school and parents who do not want their child to interact with the dog will inform the school authorities.

If a child has a phobia of dogs the dog handler may offer opportunities for the child to be slowly introduced to the dog, to reduce their fear.

A picture of the MCC school therapy dog will be placed prominently in school reception to inform everyone that there is school therapy dog working in the school. This will state the dog's name, i.e. MCC school therapy dog and the name of the main handler.

Interactions

Interactions with students will be very carefully monitored to avoid students being hurt by play scratches and nips, and to avoid undue stress to the dog. All school therapy dogs undergo the MCC School Dog Therapy Program and receive ongoing aftercare and support for the duration the dog is in school. There will always be a responsible adult in charge of the dog during interactions with students. Students and adults are required to adhere to the following:

- Always approach the MCC school dog calmly and slowly.
- Dogs should always be encouraged to keep 4 paws on the ground.
- All interactions must remain calm with the authorised adult in control at all times.
- Students must wash their hands before and after they have been handling the dog.
- Interactions with the school therapy dog will not happen in corridors (this encourages undesirable dog behaviour) interactions will only occur in controlled environments as set out by the handler in consultation with MCC instructor.
- The number of interactions the dog can have will be dependent on the length and quality of these interactions on any given day. The handler will decide this in consultation with MCC instructor.
- Timetables for the dog are discouraged by MCC, if the school do put a timetable in place, ensure the timetable is totally flexible one agreed by the handler and MCC instructor with the welfare of the dog being the primary consideration.
- **All interactions are subject to approval of the main handler who is responsible for the dog's welfare while they are working in the school.**

Dog Welfare

The welfare of the dog shall remain the primary concern. All school therapy dogs although allocated to the school remain under the ownership of My Canine Companion. MCC will remove a dog where they feel the welfare of the dog is not adequately catered for.

A dog that is unwell should preferably be left at home, if this is not possible the dog can remain in their chill zone. The dog shall not have any interactions with students when they are unwell.

Frequently Asked Questions

What will the MCC school dog do on a day-to-day basis?

The dog may visit different rooms around the school during a day but will have its own chill out zone designated where the dog can have downtime. This again will be designated by the handler in consultation with MCC instructor. The dog will always be kept under effective control.

How do I know that my child will be safe around the dog?

A risk assessment and policy will be in place and will be available on the school website. When moving around the school, the dog will always be under effective control. Students will receive instruction on how to interact safely with dogs.

Will my child pick up infections from the dog?

The dog will be fully vaccinated, treated regularly for worms and fleas and will not attend school if ill. Students will be required to wash their hands before and after handling the dog. There will be a dedicated dog toilet area away from areas that students access. There is also a dedicated bin for dog waste, which is labelled.

What if my child is allergic to dogs or afraid of them?

Parents can request that their child has no contact, or restricted access to the dog in these situations.

Any amendments to this policy must be forwarded to My Canine Companion for approval prior to publishing.