

Dogs at Mentone Primary School – Wellbeing/Therapy Program



Help for non-English speakers.

If you need help to understand the information in this policy, please contact Mentone Primary School on 9583 2995 or mentone.ps@education.vic.gov.au



PURPOSE

To explain to our school community the rules and procedures we have in place in relation to dogs attending our school grounds. This includes the procedures in place for our Wellbeing/Therapy dog program to support student engagement and mental health.

SCOPE

The Wellbeing/Therapy dog program is in place to directly support Staff and Student Wellbeing. This policy governs the program, ensuring the successful implementation of the program. Empirical evidence has shown that therapy dogs can enhance children's psychological development, improve social skills, and increase self-esteem. Dogs can also teach responsibility, compassion, and respect for other living things.

Research has demonstrated that therapy dogs in the school setting can not only make a measurable difference in terms of gaining skills such as reading enhancement, but also in contributing critically to emotional and relational development. The presence of a therapy dog decreases anxiety and enables students to work through issues such as anger management, bullying tendencies and other psycho/social problems. The introduction of a non-threatening therapy dog can serve as a catalytic vehicle for forming adaptive and satisfactory social interactions. Guided activities and group discussions help teach students how to handle interpersonal conflicts and develop constructive responses.

POLICY

Definitions

A **Wellbeing/Therapy dog** is a dog that has been suitably trained to provide animal-assisted Wellbeing/Therapy programs under the control of his/her handler.

An **assistance dog** is trained and certified by a registered organisation to perform tasks or functions that help a person with a disability to alleviate the effects of the disability.

A **handler** is a volunteer in the school who is responsible and in control of a Wellbeing/Therapy dog while on school grounds and when facilitating the animal Wellbeing/Therapy program.

A **pet dog** relates to any dog that is privately owned in the community for companionate reasons, rather than as a support function that requires specific skills or training.

A **stray dog** is any dog that is not accompanied by their owner.

Wellbeing/Therapy dogs

Mentone Primary School supports the use of a Wellbeing/Therapy dog for the benefit of our students subject to the conditions of this policy. The role of the Wellbeing/Therapy dog is to support the social and emotional needs of our students, under the guidance and supervision of their handler.

Mentone Primary School has a Wellbeing/Therapy dog who supports our student's mental health and engagement. Our Wellbeing/Therapy dog is suitably trained and integrated into the school community.

Recognised benefits from working with or visiting a Wellbeing/Therapy dog include:

- reduced stress and anxiety, including decreased learner anxiety behaviours
- improved physical and emotional Wellbeing/Therapy
- improved self-esteem, empathy and interpersonal skills
- improved relationship building and ability to pick up on social cues
- improved attendance (for disengaged students or students at risk of disengaging).

Examples of activities students may engage in with the Wellbeing/Therapy/dog include:

- petting the dog
- speaking and reading to the dog
- giving the dog commands that the dog is trained to respond to.

Where possible, Mentone Primary School will only engage with low-allergen Wellbeing/Therapy dogs. Mentone Primary School will take care to avoid, where possible, contact between the Wellbeing/Therapy dog and students, staff, and visitors where the school is aware they have allergies to dogs.

Staff, students and visitors are requested to notify the school of any health or safety concerns about the Wellbeing/Therapy dog. We are committed to consulting with students and parent(s)/carer(s) in relation to any such health or safety concerns so that appropriate arrangements can be made on a case-by-case basis.

Wellbeing/Therapy dog standards and procedures

- There will be a maximum of one school Wellbeing/Therapy dog at any given time.
- When the Wellbeing/therapy dog is on school grounds they will be under the supervision of a handler. The Wellbeing/Therapy dog will not be unsupervised or alone with students. A safe area separate to the school classrooms and offices will be allocated to the Wellbeing/Therapy dog and their handler where they will spend time when they are not working with students.
- The handler will ensure that the Wellbeing/Therapy dog does not pose a health and safety risk to any student, employee, or other person at school and that the Wellbeing/Therapy dog is brought to school only when properly groomed, bathed, free of illness or injury and of the temperament appropriate for working with the school community. In the event the school is made aware that the dog triggers a student's health condition (for example, allergies or asthma), the school will notify the student's parent/carers and ensure appropriate steps are implemented to minimise health risks.
- The Wellbeing/Therapy dog will be appropriately identified while on school grounds by wearing a green Jacket.

- No student or staff member will be required to interact with the Wellbeing/Therapy dog. If a student indicates that they wish to overcome any fear of dogs, they can be supported to do so with coaching in a controlled environment with the Wellbeing/Therapy dog and their handler.
- The Wellbeing/Therapy dog program will be communicated to parent/carer(s) at the beginning of the year in the school newsletter, and on student enrolment. In these communications, parent/carer(s) will be given the opportunity to 'opt out' of the program for their child, raise any concerns or update student medical information (such as allergies or asthma) which may be triggered by a visit from the Wellbeing/Therapy dog.

Assistance dogs

Mentone Primary School understands its obligations under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) and the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* (Vic) and will make reasonable adjustments for members of our school community with a disability who require an 'assistance animal' to help alleviate the effects of their disability. Assistance animals are permitted to attend our school with their handler. Our school Principal can lawfully ask a person to produce evidence that an animal:

- is trained specifically to assist a person to alleviate the effects of a disability (e.g., seeing eye dogs, hearing and physical assistance dogs) and
- meets standards of hygiene and behaviour appropriate for a school environment.

We understand that in some circumstances, students may require an assistance animal to attend school to help them to participate in their educational program. Mentone Primary School will consider a request by a student with a disability to allow an assistance animal to attend school with them on a case-by-case basis. If you would like to discuss this further, please contact the Principal.

Pet dogs

Mentone Primary School is not a public place, and our principal has the authority to permit or decline entry to school grounds and impose conditions of entry.

Whilst Mentone Primary School understands that many families in our school community keep dogs as pets, to ensure that our school remains a safe and inclusive place for everyone, pet dogs are not permitted on school grounds under any circumstances.

Our school community is diverse and may include people that are allergic or uncomfortable around dogs. We are also conscious of the health hazards that may be posed by dogs. We ask that families please leave their pet dogs at home or safely tether them outside school grounds when attending our school or school events.

Stray dogs

Unaccompanied or stray dogs sighted at our school should be reported immediately to the school office. School staff will contact municipal authorities and/or Victoria Police for assistance in managing and removing a stray dog from school grounds, and ensure staff and students remain safe at school.

COMMUNICATION

This policy will be communicated to our school community in the following ways:

- Available publicly on our school’s website (or insert other online parent/carer/student communication method)
- Included in staff induction processes and staff training
- Included in staff handbook/manual
- Reminders in our school newsletter
- Hard copy available from school administration upon request

RELATED POLICIES AND RESOURCES

[Duty of Care Policy](#)

[Visitors’ Policy](#)

POLICY REVIEW AND APPROVAL

Policy last reviewed	5 th September 2024
Approved by	Principal – Andrew Holmes
Next scheduled review date	September 2027