

Parent Consultation: School Pet Dog

Dear Parent/Carer

We are looking to introduce a new member to our Leavening School family who will become an integral part of our school community; a school pet dog called Lenny who belongs to Mrs Kemp.

The value of pet 'therapy' is widely accepted as a powerful aid to stimulation and communication. Studies have shown that the presence of companion animals can improve the well-being of children and lower the rate of anxiety, simply by making the environment happier, more enjoyable, and less forbidding.

Over the past few years, parents have also fed back the positive impact on their own children having pets at home. The rationale behind my decision for Leavening to have a school dog, which I am putting forward to governors, yourselves and staff is as follows:

- For the school to have a pet that was able to live as naturally as conditions would allow
- For the animal to be properly cared for outside of the school day
 - To have a pet that the children could interact with and also be of benefit to the children's social and emotional development
- To have a pet that will support sensory regulation and communication of children with complex communication needs
- To support the ethos values 'Care, share and belong' providing opportunities for the children to 'live out' these values in the context of caring for a pet
- Support emotional development along with our school focus on Personal, Social, Emotional and Health Education.
- To support the school's ongoing commitment to creating a calming, loving and family orientated environment

What are the benefits of having a school dog?

Numerous research studies have shown the benefits of dogs in schools. Evidence indicates that benefits include:

- Cognitive – companionship with a dog stimulates memory, problem-solving and game-playing
 - Social – a dog provides a positive mutual topic for discussion, encourages responsibility, wellbeing, and focused interaction with others as well as intensive interaction
 - Emotional – a school dog improves self-esteem, acceptance from others and lifts mood, often provoking laughter, and fun. Dogs can also teach compassion and respect for other living things as well as relieving anxiety. Having animals to pet and be around stimulates the vagus nerve in the brain which enables us to regulate our emotions, this then has a knock on impact on how others regulate around us and how we support others to coregulate- having dogs in schools has shown to strengthen vagal tone of both staff and pupils

- Physical – interaction with a furry friend reduces blood pressure, provides tactile stimulation, assists with pain management, gives motivation to move, walk and stimulates the senses.
- Environmental – a dog in a school increases the sense of a family environment, with all of the above benefits continuing long after the school day is over
- Reading and communication – reading to dogs has been proven to help children develop literacy skills and build confidence, through both the calming effect the dog's presence has on children as well as the fact that a dog will listen to children read without being judgemental or critical. This comforting environment helps to nurture children's enthusiasm for reading and provides them with the confidence to read aloud. Studies have shown there are benefits for preverbal children in developing interaction verbal and nonverbal communication, as with reading, the dog provides a non-judgemental, no demanding buddy to communicate with.

Lenny lives with Mrs Kemp, her husband and two children. He is a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel and he is (approx) 7 years old. The children are familiar with Lenny as he has spent some time on the school playground with them. Lenny has been selected specially because of his calm and friendly nature, his likely small stature makes him less intimidating than larger animals and he is groomed frequently which ensures he has minimal shedding where possible.

Over the past few years I have become aware of a number of schools in York who have successfully introduced a school dog. After speaking with their staff and pupils, I have been impressed by the positive impact that their dogs have had on the children, staff and whole school community. The children are familiar with Lenny as he has spent some time on the school playground with them. Following the example of the schools I have spoken to, I am proposing that we introduce a school dog in Lenny. If parents, governors and staff are in favour of introducing a school dog, Lenny will begin his transition into the classrooms. There will be a full risk assessment that has been quality assured by our Health and Safety Advisor.

Lenny will take a more active role in school life going on trips with the children, supporting positive interaction with individuals for emotional regulation and support, supporting in life skills sessions on how to look after pets and ensure ourselves and our animals are fit and healthy. Lenny will always be supervised by a trained member of staff. Please can I reassure you that the welfare of the children and the dog is of the utmost importance, the risk assessment will identify key measures to ensure both, including ensuring that the dog has appropriate areas to rest, feed and toilet.

As a parent myself, I understand that you may have some concerns around your child coming into contact with a dog in school. Below are some questions you may have:

My child is allergic to dogs.

It is understandable that some of you may be concerned about possible allergic reactions to a school dog. However, as someone who suffers with pet allergies myself, I can assure you that care and thought has been given to the breed, choosing a dog that does not shed lots of fur. The dog will be subjected to the most thorough cleanliness and grooming regime. Children will be taught to wash their hands after coming into direct contact with the dog. The dog will also only be allowed in situations with children who voluntarily wish to be in close proximity to him.

Will the dog be properly cared for?

The dog is extremely well looked after at home. He will come to school most days and will be based safely in the main office. He will be fully insured and will have regular visits to the vets where he will be kept up to date with vaccinations, worming and flea treatments.

My child is scared of dogs

Some children may have had upsetting experiences and thus have a fear of dogs (or another animal). The dog will only be in direct contact with children who feel comfortable to do so. Children will be made aware of where the dog is and when it will visit. He is calm and gentle around children, is renowned for having a loving nature and a family pet. He is small in stature and will therefore look 'less threatening' than larger dogs. Experience and research have shown that, with proper guidance and handling, children can learn to overcome their fear of animals and grow in respect and appreciation for them. It is really important that we know if your child has an allergy to dogs or a serious phobia of dogs. If we go ahead with introducing Lenny to school, we will be sending out a form that will need to be completed, signed and returned.

I would very much appreciate it if you could fill out the consultation survey on the email, and sent this back to the admin address by Thursday 3rd February 2022.

Kind regards,

Sian Mitchell
Head Teacher