

Comfort Dogs in Schools Program Policy

Ratified by School Council November 2022

Rationale

The aim of the Comfort Dogs in Schools Program (CDIS) is to build upon the current wellbeing initiatives implemented at Glen Waverley Primary School. These initiatives strive to provide students with the skills and strategies needed to better understand themselves and others, as well as manage relationships, recognise and regulate emotions and develop empathy towards others.

Building upon the successes of our Guide Dog and Seeing Eye Dog Puppy Raising Program, the CDIS Program will provide ongoing opportunities for students to form a strong connection with the animal, developing their ability to self-regulate and have a higher level of social awareness.

Over the past decade, many studies have been conducted that analyse the positive impact that comfort dogs have in a school environment. Comfort dogs react and respond to people and their environment, under the guidance and direction of their owner. Research has stated that some of the benefits of having comfort dogs in a school environment include:

- Teach empathy and appropriate interpersonal skills
- Help students developed stronger social skills
- Soothe students experiencing emotional distress
- Build a stronger bond between students and their classroom community
- Improve an individual's ability to interpret social cues
- Increase student engagement and school attendance

There is no current Comfort Dog at Glen Waverley Primary School.

Guidelines

Pre-Attending School

- The registered owner must provide Glen Waverley Primary School with Council certification of Registration, proof of microchipping and certificate of C5 Vaccination and ongoing flea and worm treatments
- The school will also be provided with training certificates such as 'Puppy School' attendance, obedience training and comfort dog training before the animal can enter the school.
- The comfort dog is required to be toilet trained
- The registered owner must provide all the items the comfort dog requires such as a day bed, blankets, food, toys, etc.

Daily Management

- The comfort dog will be shared throughout the school, having a 'home base' in a classroom environment each week.
- Whilst in a classroom, the comfort dog will have a 'play pen', a safe space for them to sleep and relax in. Students will not be allowed within this space, as to care for the wellbeing needs of the dog.
- Before moving to a new classroom space, all students will participate in an engaging, 'Comfort Dogs in the Classroom' learning task, where they will be explicitly taught the best ways to interact with, and care for an animal. This session will focus on building their empathy for others, highlighting the importance of caring for the animal and paying attention to their needs and how they might communicate them.
- The comfort dog will be kept on the lead whilst moving throughout the school, and will only be able to roam within a classroom if it is safe to do so.
- The comfort dog will be walked at recess and lunchtime breaks, and provided with regular toilet breaks in a safe, dog designated area.
- If at any stage, the comfort dog or any student is experiencing distress because of their interaction, they will be immediately removed from that environment and placed in a quiet area to ensure safety for all.

Student Wellbeing

- The comfort dog will be a resource used within the school wellbeing program led by the school's wellbeing leader.
- While under constant teacher supervision, the dog will be able to work with students in range of situations, including:
 - o Experiences of emotional distress when transitioning from home to school.
 - o Providing emotional support to students following incidents at home or at school.
 - o Focus group situations focusing on social skills building, identifying social cues and showing empathy.
 - o Individual wellbeing workshops focusing on specific social and emotional strategies.

Student Learning

- The comfort dog will also be a resource used within classrooms as a part of the teaching and learning program.
- They will be a visiting guest in all classrooms for a period of time to be determined by the teacher based on student learning needs and the wellbeing of the animal.
- They will be kept in their play pen area to ensure minimal distractions during learning time, and will only be able to roam once calmness can be maintained.
- Before entering a classroom for an extended stay, students will participate in an engaging learning experience to learn about how to best care for the dog, how to interact with them safely and how to interpret their needs.

Parent Permission

- All interactions with the comfort dog are to be as positive as possible, and to ensure this, no child will be forced to interact with the comfort dog if they do not want to. The aim of the program will be to build confidence and resilience when working with animals, which for some students may take longer than for others.
- At the beginning of each year, a notice will go home to families to explain the purpose and benefits of having a comfort dog in the school. If families do not want their child to be a participant in this program, parent will be able to 'opt out' by informing the school of their choice.

- Regular information will be distributed via school newsletters informing families of how the comfort dog has assisted students, and how they have been involved throughout the school, helping our students learn.

Suitability

The Principal, or their nominee in the absence of the Principal, has the right to terminate the use of the comfort dog if the said animal is deemed not suitable due to behaviour, issues towards the children, staff, parents, visitors or other animals.

Evaluation

This policy will be reviewed in accordance with the Glen Waverley Primary School Policy Review Timeline, more often if necessary due to changes in regulations or circumstances.

Due Date for Review: November 2024

This policy was last ratified by School Council in November 2022

Occupational Health and Safety

Please refer to the Safe Work Method Statement for Interacting with the School Comfort Dog.

References

<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/teaching-with-animals/policy>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-20/therapy-dogs-can-help-reduce-student-stress-anxiety-depression/9564120>

https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1062&context=gs_rp