

Man's child's BEST FRIEND

PAULINA JAGUS



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Studies have demonstrated the advantages of owning a well-trained dog in different circumstances. Scientific research backs the notion that being in the company of a dog can alleviate stress and anxiety and decrease heart rate. Pets can help children manage emotions, foster social connections, and enhance communication skills. Moreover, dogs can assist students in feeling at ease at school, ultimately improving their academic performance.

The Well-being Dog Program was first introduced in Victorian schools, and now over 250 schools across Australia have adopted it. Bringing wellbeing dogs into schools has positively impacted student attendance and eagerness to learn. Both students and staff have reported increased happiness and an anxiety reduction. Woden Valley ELC is yet to receive accreditation, which isn't a regulatory requirement. We have decided to try the program first to avoid a significant financial commitment. It's important to note that the wellbeing dogs are specifically chosen for each environment and are not therapy or assistance dogs.

The dogs chosen for emotional support are not trained for obedience or companionship like service or companion dogs. Rather, they are selected for their gentle and friendly nature and their ability to interact well with children. Emotional support dogs, also known as wellbeing dogs, are trained to provide comfort and support to individuals with mental health conditions or emotional disorders. It's important to understand that emotional support dogs are not the same as service dogs, as they are not trained to perform tasks related to a person's disability and do not have the same level of privileges. They can be used in therapy settings or in private homes where emotional support is needed.

Our initial observation was that neurodivergent children tend to become calmer and more attentive when a dog is present, especially when participating in group activities. Additionally, we have observed that dogs can provide immediate relief for children experiencing severe separation anxiety. For adults, dogs can help manage trauma, anxiety,

the escalation cycle, leadership, and communication. They can also promote empathy, improve social awareness, and decrease reactivity. We prioritise our educators' well-being and mental health, and we have already noticed positive changes in mood and energy levels during the first few visits.

As an educational facility, we prioritise the safety and well-being of the children in our care. Children's comfort and safety, and if they exhibit any reluctance or fear, our staff will not compel them to interact with the animal but instead provide assistance. The children are free to approach the dog at their own pace and in their own way. At our centre, we have an open and honest relationship with families. We welcome families to inform us about any fears or allergies their child or family may have. We are always willing to provide alternative program options for the children. Moreover, we will display posters on our front door to inform visitors that a dog is present on the premises. To achieve this, we have implemented specific policies and procedures that are designed to mitigate risks and ensure everyone's safety.

Our program also focuses on teaching children about dogs and how to handle them properly, which helps to reduce accidents and anxiety within the community. So far, we've been having great success with the program. It is very closely monitored, and senior staff are always present when the dog is brought to the classroom. To ensure that the children do not overwork the dog and have limited access to it, we have created a schedule to rotate the dogs and monitor age appropriateness. The dogs are kept on a lead most of the time and under the control of their handlers. We may allow the dogs off the lead for a short period during a nature walk, provided we feel comfortable. During each scheduled visit, the handler will remind the children about the proper approach to the dog, introduce themselves, and observe signs of safety before approaching. We do not allow the dogs to run around freely.

We are frequently asked what happens if a dog in our centre displays aggressive behaviour, such as growling or nipping at children. Our approach to discipline is based on positive reinforcement, and we do not support physical punishment. While we do not expect such incidents to occur, if one does happen, we will remove the dog from the classroom and investigate the situation to identify the reason for the behaviour. This is our standard policy and procedure.

Our team relies mainly on 5 dogs owned by staff members who have been with us for a long time. They are well-acquainted with the children and the premises.

At this stage, we are only at the very beginning of this program. We decided that the dogs would be joining the nature walks and potentially slowly being introduced in classrooms for extended periods later in the year.



I have been involved in the early childhood education and care sector since my studies began in Sydney in 2011. Throughout my career, I have held various positions in different organisations, including Family Day Care and Training and Assessment. I have been the Director at Woden Valley ELC for the past six years. I hold a Bachelor of Education and am currently pursuing a Graduate Diploma in Psychology. Children are the foundation of our world and providing them with the best opportunities to grow and develop is crucial. Woden Valley ELC is a place where the excitement never runs out. Currently, we are passionately working on the well-being dog project while also dedicating ourselves to publishing our second picture book for children soon.