

# Dogs in Schools



The aim of this report is to endeavour to answer the question:

*Should dogs be in schools and how can we manage it safely?*

Canine Comprehension has worked in hundreds of primary and secondary schools throughout Victoria, tutoring students by helping them make more positive connections in their lives. We achieve this with the partnership of a well-trained, friendly therapy dog and a professional, experienced tutor.



Canine Comprehension dog and tutor teams receive overwhelmingly positive feedback about the success of our programs, so it is no surprise that it is often suggested that because Canine Comprehension programs have been so successful - school staff, who own a friendly dog should be able to bring their own dog into the school.



The risks associated with having a working dog in a school need to be carefully taken into consideration. Canine Comprehension has spent 10 years building a business model to ensure that all safety requirements and animal ethics are well-considered and risk factors are significantly lowered. Our staff are trained to know how to manage a dog in a busy classroom. This structure enables students and therapy dogs to remain safe and happy in our care.

We are concerned, however, that schools choosing to have an untrained dog in their school have not considered all the risks.

## **So what are the risks?**

We see the risks as threefold:

1. the dog must be safe with the children
2. the dog must be healthy and zoonosis free
3. the working dogs' welfare must be taken into consideration.

When considering how safe a dog is for work with children, especially in high distraction environments such as schools, one must really know how to read the finer details of dog body language to be able to judge if the dog in question does have the right temperament and training for every situation they find themselves in.

For instance, many people think their dogs would be safe in a classroom or school playground because they are good with the children in the family and home environment. Therapy dogs working in schools must be tested in situations where there is a great deal of noise, a lot of movement, different smells and foods as distractions, as well as having a handler who is focused both on the dog and on the children. Even if a therapy dog has worked in environments such as nursing homes and hospitals, a school is yet a very different challenge. There is a saying in dog training: “Untrained is unknown.” and if the handler hasn’t trained for a busy school environment they simply do not know if their dog would be suited to and safe for such work. When a dog is overwhelmed by noise, movement and smells they can experience sensory overload and trigger stacking. It is difficult for a dog who is not familiar with this situation to react accordingly to its handler’s commands.



Imagine an unusually friendly dog, on lead who is feeling anxious. Like all animals in a perceived threatening situation, they have three choices: Fight, Flight or Freeze. Flight has been taken away due to the restraints of the lead. The dog could freeze, try to avoid the situation and have the anxiety build. Or, they could try to ‘take control of the situation by barking, growling, lunging or biting. One reaction is not fair or ethical for dog, the other is disastrous for the children in contact with the dog. When handlers, who are not able to read dog body language put their dogs into situations where the dog is stressed, there will inevitably be a situation where the overwhelmed dog feels they have to hide, anxiously avoid or aggressively defend themselves.



It is simply a fact that most people working in schools are not unusually dog trainers. They are not expected to be able to read all of the subtle signs that dogs show when intimidated or needing a break. Reading dog body language goes much further than looking at a wagging or tucked tail.



Trainers are taught to look at subtle eye movements, avoidance, repetitive habits, back straightening and different types of panting behaviour. Those who have dogs in schools need to become their dog's trainers - they need to have the skills to both observe accurately and positively teach the dog what is expected of them.



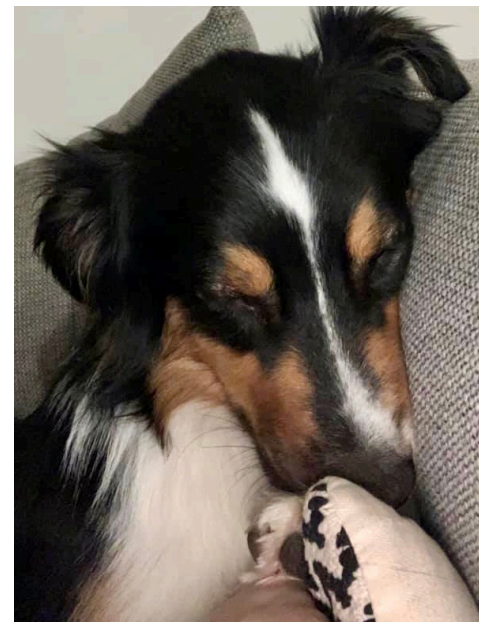
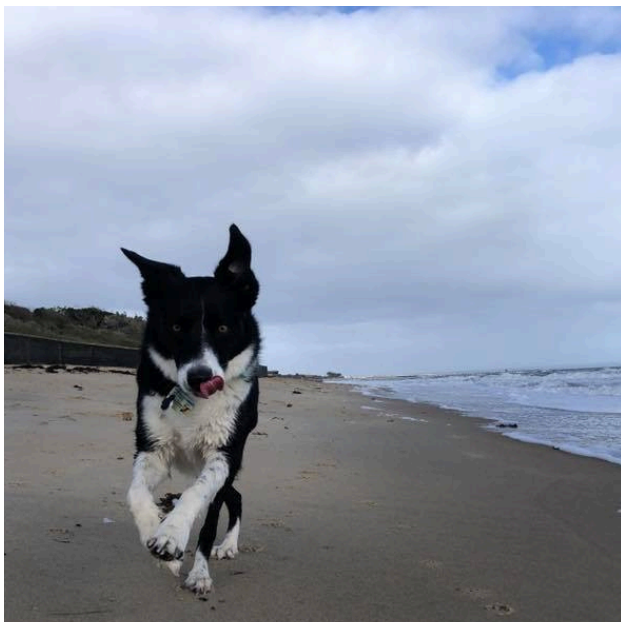
Our tutors have either initially studied an AAT certification elsewhere or have completed our own Pathway to Employment course. A rigorous AAT course should provide a comprehensive background to Therapy-Dog training, covering handling, socialisation, psychology, body language, and promoting good behaviour.

***“Dog bites do not come out of the blue. They occur when handlers are not paying attention, or do not know what behaviour to pay attention to in the first place.”***

It should also provide information to fully understand Animal-Assisted Interventions, including how Human-Animal Interactions (HAI) are beneficial, how to manage ethical and legal issues, and understand occupational health and safety. At the end of a course, participants should have the confidence and skills to begin working with their dogs in school settings.

All Canine Comprehension therapy dogs are expected to be able to sit on command, hold a drop-stay for up to an hour at a time, walk on a loose lead, understand food refusal and demonstrate a number of trick training exercises. These expectations should be met under distraction, as that is how the dog will need to behave in a school. Canine Comprehension human/dog teams are expected to find novel settings for training such as city walks, sports days, festivals, cafes etc. All of this training not only helps normalise high-energy experiences for the dog but also allows the handler and dog to communicate effectively in busy environments, such as a school.





## **The dog must be healthy, happy and zoonosis free.**

A zoonosis is an infectious disease that has jumped from a non-human animal, such as dogs, to humans. Zoonotic pathogens may be bacterial, viral or parasitic, or may involve unconventional agents and can spread to humans through direct contact or through food, water or the environment. For a therapy dog to be working with the public, a strict vaccination, flea and worming schedule should be in place and regularly signed off by a vet. Dogs should have health checks on a regular basis to make sure that the dog isn't suffering from an ear infection, tooth infections, sore paws, skin irritation etc. as this may cause the dog to increase sensitivity to touch and may react dangerously or nervously with people.

We must also consider human allergies. The main sources of dog allergens are saliva, dander (shed skin particles) and hair. All breeds of dogs can potentially cause allergies, although some may not shed as much hair and dander as others. By maintaining the highest standards of cleanliness, we can inform schools and parents with confidence that our dogs are healthy, happy, clean and most importantly, safe.

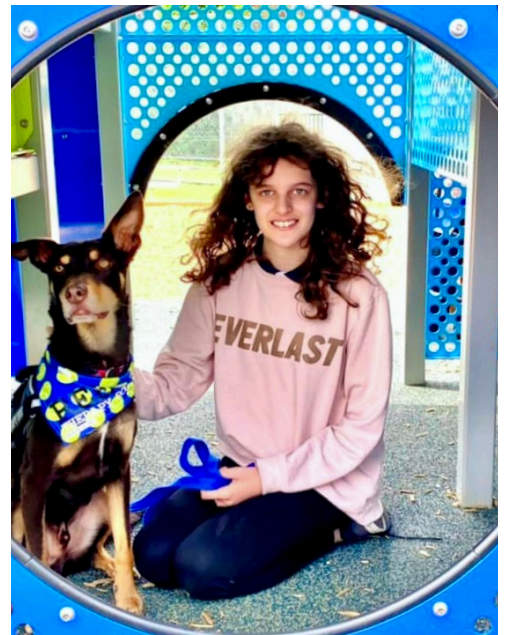
## The dog's welfare must be taken into consideration.

Unfortunately, there is are no uniform expectations or government-sanctioned industry standards for the welfare of working therapy dogs in Australia at the moment. Canine Comprehension trains its tutors to follow the Australian-based Lead that Way Institute in this regard, which founded the Animal-Assisted Intervention Association of Australia (AAIAA). The AAIAA provides guidance, leadership and certainty in guidelines and standards of practice for AAI in Australia. Canine Comprehension also uses the UK, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs', Code of Practice for the Welfare of Dogs (2018) as a guide which states that handlers should:

- Provide your dog with a comfortable, clean, dry, quiet, safe, draught-free rest area, which has appropriate ventilation.
- Make sure when the dog is resting or working that their environment is an adequate temperature.
- Provide your dog with access to an appropriate place, away from their resting area, which they can use as a toilet area regularly as needed and at least every few hours.
- When you transport your dog make sure they are comfortable and safe at all times.
- Do not leave your dog unattended in situations, or for periods of time that are likely to cause them distress or render them unsafe.
- Keep your dog under control and safe at all times.



Canine Comprehension wishes to give our therapy dogs a long, happy and healthy working life. To do this we employ the best standards from Australia and overseas. The purpose in seeking to comply with such standards means our tutors feel confident that they are following best practice for working with their dogs. No set of standards can tell them precisely how to care for their therapy dog, each animal has its own unique set of needs, but it does summarise important aspects and guidance as to what to do when making decisions about their standard of care.



We at Canine Comprehension work very hard for a trusting bond to be built by the tutor and therapy dog. This trust is developed through time, training and, most importantly, living with the dog. This trust allows our dogs to go into busy schools and feel relaxed enough to focus on their job because they know their owner can be trusted to take the lead in every situation.





## In summary

We see the benefit of dogs working with young people every day. Dogs in schools can soothe worried minds and gently calm wriggly bodies, (our work is underpinned by current research in neuroscience and neurobiology), create a more positive learning environment, and an opportunity to further build quality peer relationships and foster a safe place where students feel accepted. Generally, therapy dogs create an inviting and warm environment and increase feelings of relaxation through a comforting presence during tough times.



**Written by Sarah Macdonald, CEO of Canine Comprehension.**

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Sarah is both a Teacher and Professional Dog Trainer. She has taught English in Australia and overseas. She holds a Ba Arts (History/Politics) and a Masters in Teaching. Sarah has been a curriculum developer in secondary schools and adult education. By being involved in both education and dog training, Sarah saw the opportunity to use obedient dogs to help students learn.

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[www.CanineComprehension.com.au](http://www.CanineComprehension.com.au)**