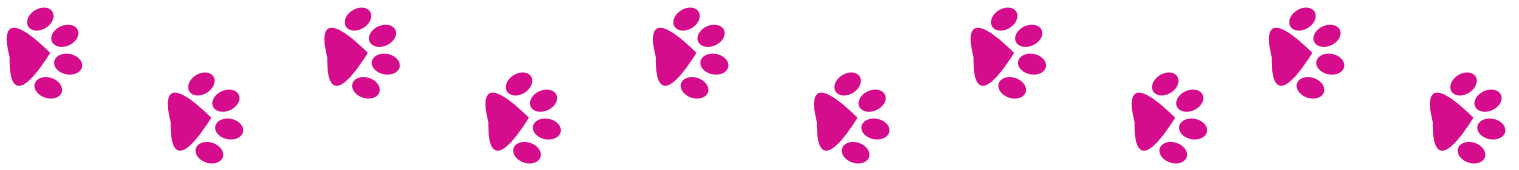




CHARLOTTE'S **LITTER**

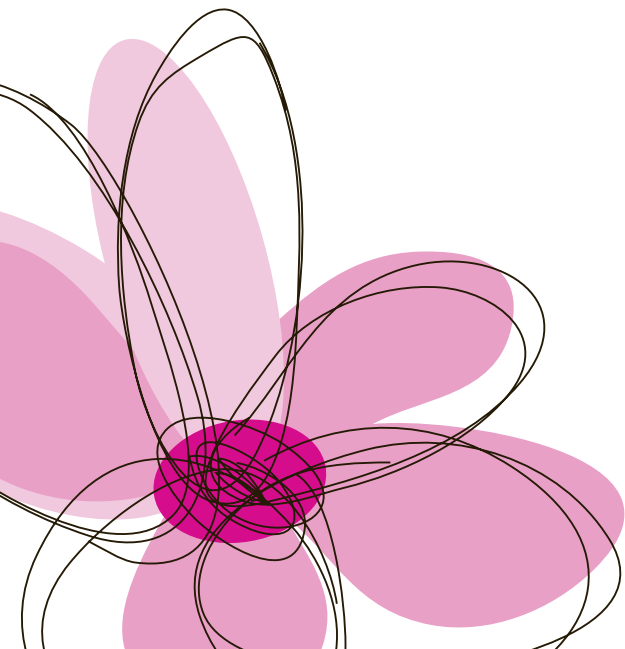
*Good dogs. Great listeners.*



# BRINGING THERAPY DOGS TO YOUR SCHOOL

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**A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR  
SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS  
AND EDUCATORS**



# Have you thought about it?

Have you considered being a part of the comfort and support of a therapy dog program in your school? Increasingly, school educators across the country and even internationally are starting to realize the benefits of therapy dogs in the school environment. Unfortunately, the majority of elementary, middle and high schools have yet to fully tap into this tremendous tool that can greatly serve its students. Yes, there are questions and challenges to adopting a dog therapy program but hopefully this article can address those issues and outline a process to implementing a program that can bring a valuable resource to your school.

Following the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012, the parents of Charlotte Bacon along with our Newtown community saw firsthand the tremendous help and benefits comfort and therapy dogs could offer. As a way to further honor Charlotte, the parents of Charlotte Bacon and Newtown Kindness ([www.newtownkindness.org](http://www.newtownkindness.org)) launched Charlotte's Litter with the focused mission to advocate for animal assisted activity with therapy/comfort dogs in schools and community institutions. Charlotte's Litter seeks to connect resources and experienced people to help provide input and guidance for schools in their process of fact finding and adoption of an appropriate therapy dog program.

After months of observing these therapy dogs in action, schools in Newtown such as Reed Intermediate School now have integrated therapy dogs as part of their ongoing school life. Following this example, other schools in the region are also in the process of introducing therapy dogs as part of their regular services for students.

Administrators and teachers can face a lot of barriers in seeking to adopt new programs, and not surprisingly can be resistant to changing or altering current programs. Bringing dogs into schools can be seen as risky and loaded with concerns about potential liability. Implementing an animal facilitated therapy program will take work, coordination, and support from various sources. However, the benefits to students, teachers and the administration have been shown to be well worth it. Gathering needed support may sometimes be a struggle, but the gains from a well-run dog therapy program in a school far outweigh the initial efforts in setting up a viable program. Being knowledgeable and providing supporting research will help provide answers to the potential concerns of interested parties.



The purpose of this article is to help school administrators and educators better understand the benefits of animal assisted therapy in a school setting. In addition it will address the common objections or concerns for placing therapy dogs in a school, outline helpful steps in implementing a program, and suggest resources for developing programs for educators, counselors and others to easily integrate dogs into their respective areas.

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## 1. Is it worth it?

Over the years, numerous research studies have been undertaken to validate the benefits of animal assisted activity and in particular the contribution of therapy dogs. Empirical evidence has shown that therapy dogs can enhance children's psychological development, improve social skills, and increase self-esteem among other benefits. Dogs can also teach responsibility, compassion, and respect for other living things. Dogs in the classroom can be used to calm fears, relieve anxiety, and teach skills. Here is a summary of potential benefits (Data adapted from the Australian Companion Animal Council):

- **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
- **Social** – a visit with a dog provides a positive mutual topic for discussion, promotes greater self-esteem and well-being, and focused interaction with others
- **Cognitive** – companionship with a dog stimulates memory, problem solving and game playing
- **Emotional** – an adorable four-legged visitor improves self-esteem, acceptance from others, and lifts mood often provoking laughter
- **Environmental** – a dog in a facility decreases the feeling of a sterile environment, lifts mood and this continues after visit

Research has demonstrated that therapy dogs properly managed in the school setting can not only make a measurable difference in terms of gaining various skills such as reading enhancement, but also in contributing critically to emotional and relational development. School counselors are finding that the presence of a therapy dog can decrease anxiety and enable students to work through issues such as anger management, bullying tendencies and others 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.

In short, the benefits of dog therapy programs in schools have been well documented through research and well-satisfied end-users as well. However, in spite of the known benefits, one major study of the use of therapy dogs in California schools back in 2002 showed at that time that less than 20% of those surveyed used dogs in their school. The same study confirmed if concerns or objections could be adequately answered, some 93% of the respondents indicated that they would be supportive of dog therapy programs in their school. In recent years, support has grown for using therapy dogs but still resistance is met by administrators and educators due to either lack of awareness, lack of reliable information and data, or concern for the potential risks and liabilities.

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## 2. What are the objections?

Questions and concerns are inevitable when it comes to introducing a new and perhaps perceived radical program into a school. The following summary results from the California school survey of 2002 mentioned earlier are still typical of many schools that have not proactively adopted a dog therapy program. Potential concerns that overall respondents in the California survey rated in terms of “very important” most frequently were:

- **Legal Implications and Liability (50.5%)**
- **Supervision (43.3%)**
- **Allergic Reactions (40.2%)**
- **Potential harm to students and staff (36.1%)**
- **Animal maintenance (30.9%)**
- **Potential harm to animals (28.9%)**
- **Maintenance costs (26.8%)**
- **Hygiene/Cleanliness/Disease (26.8%)**
- **Phobic fears of staff and students (25.8%)**
- **Animal odor (7.2%)**

The reality is that all of these objections can be adequately met when schools do their homework, prepare teachers and students properly, communicate clearly with parents, and work with qualified and competent therapy dog organizations. By comparison, numerous health centers such as hospitals are using therapy dogs and their requirements may be even more demanding.

### Let's look more closely at some of the above concerns.

- **Legal liability.** There are a number of reliable and well experienced organizations such as Pet Partners and Therapy Dogs International who help train, evaluate and sponsor their dog handlers. Dog handlers representing these organizations carry significant insurance coverage of \$1-2 million dollars to cover potential risks or liabilities. Furthermore, consent forms can be provided for children and parents to ensure full awareness and to deter potential liability.
- **Allergic reactions.** Understandably, parents and educators may be concerned about potential allergic reactions to dogs within the school environment. However, qualified dog handlers are required by their organizations to meet cleanliness and grooming requirements minimizing allergic contact. Dogs also are only put in situations where students voluntarily participate thus avoiding risky contact.

- **Animal maintenance.** Reliable therapy dog organizations require regular veterinarian checks for their dogs along with regular evaluations of their handlers to maintain their certification status. Competent dog handlers are trained to watch for potential harm to either a child or their own dog and are primarily responsible to manage the animal when on site.
- **Fear of dogs.** There is no doubt that some children have had very traumatic experiences with a pet and thus have a severe fear of contact with a dog for example. Because the therapy dog program is implemented by permission or voluntarily, and only in areas where unwanted contact with a dog can be avoided, the fear issue can be minimized. Experience and research has also shown that with proper guidance and handling, children can learn to overcome their fear of animals and with it, grow in respect and appreciation of them.



### 3. What are the goals of a therapy dog program in a school?

While therapy dogs have been used fairly widely in recent years for reading enhancement, a therapy dog program can contribute much more. Here is a summary of the areas where the proper use of therapy dogs in a school setting can contribute significantly and help to achieve important goals in student development:

- Dogs can assist counselors working with students who have anger management issues, bullying behavior and other anti-social conduct.  
**GOAL: Increase empathy/compassion.**
- Dogs can assist counselors with students who are victims of bullying and related behaviors.  
**GOAL: Decrease retaliatory violence and improve self-esteem.**
- Dogs can assist counselors with students who are socially disconnected from the mainstream student body.  
**GOAL: Help the student stay connected with social networks.**
- Dogs can help in the reduction of stress and anxiety among children in social settings that are stressful:  
**GOAL: Reduce anxiety levels and help children to decompress after traumatic circumstances.**
- Dogs can contribute to the improvement of reading and comprehension skills of students having difficulties.  
**GOAL: Improve reading skills, comprehension and increase confidence and literary interest.**
- Integrating trained therapy dogs into the emergency preparedness and response plans of a school system when a critical incident occurs can have major benefits.  
**GOAL: Lessen the emotional trauma of a critical incident/event for students, teachers and staff.**

The above programs have been increasingly used in recent years with documented results. Sadly, many school administrators or educators are not aware of the scope and value of dog therapy and thus have only used dog programs sporadically or piecemeal at schools and learning centers.

## 4. Next steps in implementing a dog therapy program.

There are many organizations and resources available to assist when considering the introduction of a therapy dog program. For the school administrator who would like to know more or develop a therapy dog program, here are some suggested steps.

- **Do your homework.** There is a great deal of information available to help explain how a dog therapy program can work in a school setting and what is required to implement it. Just by simply Googling “Therapy Dogs in Schools” you can find numerous articles and organizations which offer help. The best way to overcome potential barriers or resistance to a dog therapy program is to understand the facts and review the research that is now available in order to answer questions or objections. While cost is relatively minimal it should always be addressed at the outset of implementing a program. **Here is a short sample of articles that can help provide further information:**
  - <http://www.therapydogs.org/documents/A%20Dog%20Goes%20to%20School.pdf>.
  - <http://www.webmd.com/add-adhd/childhood-adhd/features/integrating-pet-therapy>
  - <http://www.schooltherapydogs.org/>
  - [http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_admin/admin/admin559.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin559.shtml)
  - [http://vet.tufts.edu/pr/resources/benefits\\_of\\_reading\\_assistance\\_dogs.pdf](http://vet.tufts.edu/pr/resources/benefits_of_reading_assistance_dogs.pdf)
- **Talk with a “satisfied customer”.** It is very helpful to talk with those who have been through the process and have seen both the benefits as well as some of the problems that need to be addressed. Recently the City of Milford, Connecticut developed and adopted an integrated program of utilizing therapy dogs not only in their schools but in their health care facilities as well. They are also in the process of adopting a K-9 First Responders program for emergency situations. Other schools across the country are moving towards adopting this program as well.
- **Find a competent consultant.** A good starting point is to visit the websites of several recognized and reliable organizations offering assistance in establishing dog programs. Some of these organizations are national and others regional. Groups like Pet Partners offer free phone consultations to answer questions and help you think through what is involved or required. Therapy dog organizations can provide the guidelines and tool kits to prepare your school, students and parents with the necessary information and forms to facilitate the program. These organizations also can provide the dog teams that come to the school with trained and certified handlers to actually implement the program. Charlotte’s Litter is available to advise and point towards helpful resources as well.

Here is a brief list of dog therapy organizations that may be available to provide assistance and resources for your school program:

- **Therapy Dogs International** (<http://www.tdi-dog.org/>)
  - **Pet Partners** (<http://www.petpartners.org/>)
  - **ITA - Intermountain Therapy Animals (R.E.A.D)** (<http://www.therapyanimals.org/Home.html>)
  - **Love on a Leash** (<http://www.loveonaleash.org/>)
  - **Therapy Dogs Inc.** (<https://www.therapydogs.com/Public/Home.aspx>)
  - **The Good Dog Foundation** (<http://thegooddogfoundation.org/>)
  - **Bright and Beautiful Therapy Dogs** (<http://www.golden-dogs.org/>)
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- **Establish a site assessment.** In order to have a safe program, it is important for staff to familiarize themselves with basic safety and risk management information about animal-assisted therapy activities. A site assessment checklist as a planning tool would be helpful to determine if a dog therapy program is suitable for your facility. Dog therapy organizations may be able to provide the checklist and assist in the evaluation process.  
[http://www.petpartners.org/facilities\\_info](http://www.petpartners.org/facilities_info)
  - **Establish policies and procedures.** It is important to clarify how the program will work, who will be responsible, and what are the guidelines for managing it. Again, organizations like Pet Partners can provide sample policies and procedures to help develop your own.
  - **Register your facility.** It is necessary to formally register your school program with the dog therapy organization of choice. There is a modest fee involved but compliance with their standards and requirements is necessary to form the working partnership.
  - **Recruit animal therapy teams.** In most areas there are local groups of volunteers who are certified and regulated by their therapy dog organization. For instance, Pet Partners can assist you in contacting local affiliate and community partners, and likewise other organizations can do so also.
  - **Start small.** It may be advisable to start with a pilot program and then as you develop competency and experience, expand from there. In other words, begin with a limited program at one school and then as success is gained, expand the program to the district level.

## 5. Taking the first step.

Perhaps the above list of things that needs to be done to implement a dog therapy program in your school may seem a bit overwhelming. The reality is that the process is more streamlined and manageable than at first impression. There are groups like Charlotte's Litter available to consult and connect you with the necessary resources to implement a viable and successful program. There are knowledgeable and qualified people within many of the dog therapy programs who would happily advise and assist. We would encourage you to at least take the first step and explore the possibilities.

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## 6. Further resources.

As mentioned earlier, there are numerous articles and documents available on the web that can provide helpful information and research on dog therapy programs. Here are a few additional books outlining research that may be of help.

- **Socio-Emotional Effects of a Dog in the Classroom.** Andrea Beetz<sup>1, 2</sup> 1 University of Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany. 2University of Rostock, Rostock, Germany.
- **Quantifying the Impact of Incorporating Therapy Dogs in an Afterschool Program: A Comparison of Net Change in Reading Fluency.** Jennifer Emmert<sup>1</sup>, Sue Gonzales<sup>2</sup> 1The San Francisco SPCA, San Francisco, CA, USA. jemmert@sfspca.org 2E.R. Taylor Elementary School, San Francisco, CA, USA.
- **Studying for Exams Just Got More Relaxing—Animal-Assisted Activities at the University of Connecticut Library.** Reynolds, Jo Ann; Rabschutz, Laurel. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*. 2011 Oct; 18(4): 359-367.
- **Adolescent Social Work Journal. 2011 Jun; 28(3): 243-256. Kids, Dogs, and the Occupation of Literacy.** Scott, Keri; Haseman, Jean; Hammetter, Rona *OT Practice*, 2005 Feb 21; 10(3): 16-20.
- **Active Open Learner Models as Animal Companions: Motivating Children to Learn Through Interacting with My-Pet and Our-Pet.** Chen, Zhi-Hong; Chou, Chih-Yueh; Deng, Yi-Chan; Chan, Tak-Wai. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education*, 2007; 17(2): 145-167.



## 6. Further resources continued.

- **THE USE OF DOGS IN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS: CURRENT USE, SUPPORT FOR, POTENTIAL CONCERNS AND EDUCATOR FAMILIARITY WITH POTENTIAL BENEFITS.** Holly McLean Ryan, Graduate College University of Wisconsin-Stout, June, 2002
- **R.E.A.D. Is a Pawsitive Program for Kids of All Ages.** Originally published in Interactions, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2001.  
By Sandi Martin
- **Angels on a Leash: Therapy Dogs and the Lives They Touch.** David Frei , 2011. This is a more popular approach to understanding the benefits of therapy dogs in a variety of settings



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Feel free to contact us for more information and suggestions.

[www.newtownkindness.org](http://www.newtownkindness.org)

[www.charlotteslitter.org](http://www.charlotteslitter.org)

