

Saving the next generation

How Dogs Helping Kids is turning young lives around.

✍ Sarah Kidby



Dogs Helping Kids is transforming the lives of children in the UK, not only improving literacy and academic achievement, but also promoting respect and non-violence, educating the next generation of responsible pet owners and providing troubled young people with a reason to feel positive and confident.

Specially trained dogs work in schools, colleges and libraries across the country as educational and therapeutic aids, helping children with a wide variety of needs, including those with autism, dyslexia, post-traumatic stress disorder, behavioural issues and even truancy.

And it all began with a teenager who was so inspired by the power of dogs helping children, that she went on to form her own charity.



The inspiration

Professional dog trainer Tracey Berridge knew that she wanted to set up a charity like Dogs Helping Kids (DHK) when she saw the film *Skeezzer* as a teenager. It charts the story of America's first canine co-therapist, who helped troubled children at a psychiatric hospital in the 1980s.

Dogs Helping Kids has been her life's work for more than 30 years and it has evolved into a complex and unique charity. Since it started in North Devon 15 years ago, it has become a national charity with over 60 dogs in schools and colleges across the country.

Tracey was the first person in the UK to carry out academic research on dogs in the school environment; she discovered that bringing dogs into the classroom could not only bring tremendous benefits to children, it could also help to reduce animal cruelty by teaching kindness, respect and non-violence.

The dogs

DHK School Dogs are divided into four categories:

Visiting School Dogs: These dogs visit one school as often as they can, whether for a few hours every week or month, or several days per week. They are owned by DHK volunteers.

Attending School Dogs: Are in attendance most days at one particular school, and are usually owned by the head teacher, deputy head or SENCO. The majority of DHK dogs now fall into this category.

Educational School Dogs: Accompany DHK staff on educational talks in schools and colleges, where they demonstrate clicker training and meet students.

Support School Dogs: Work with teenagers during difficult times, supporting those with anxiety, depression or social deprivation, as well as those who are 'at risk'. They act as a best friend, supporting teenagers in their educational environment and helping them to learn positive dog training methods.

All dogs are trained in four roles in the educational environment, of which they may perform one or all:

Listening dogs: By offering unconditional acceptance, listening dogs help children to improve their reading skills. DHK dogs are trained to read three to six words on flashcards, which not only amazes children and staff alike, but also encourages and motivates reluctant readers.

The dogs are also taught to 'snuggle', putting their head on the child's lap, and to focus on the inside of the child's book, following the pages while they read.

Classroom dogs: These dogs relax in the classroom during lessons which has a calming effect on children and has been found to improve academic achievement and motivation.

Reward dogs: If a child has worked particularly hard or achieved something significant, they get to spend time with a dog, learning to groom, train, walk or play with them. This has worked very well as an incentive for truants, helping to significantly reduce the rate of absenteeism.

Therapy dogs: These dogs work one-to-one with children in difficult times, for example those suffering as a result of bullying, abuse, bereavement, or even dog phobias.

The training programme

When it comes to dogs working with children, the charity insists upon the highest standards of training and animal welfare. 'Reading dogs' have become increasingly popular in the UK but DHK firmly believes that, to ensure the safety of all involved, dogs should only be working with children and teenagers if they have been specifically trained, assessed and certified to do so.

All DHK dogs are required to complete a two-year training programme consisting of six increasingly difficult assessments and an annual assessment thereafter. The charity works with each school for nearly a year before the school dog starts work.

The Link

Research suggests that if a child has not had a relationship with a dog by the age of eight, they may find it difficult to interact with and understand

dogs later. 'The link' is a US term used to describe the association between animal cruelty and violence against humans. A child harming an animal may be being abused themselves, or witnessing violence at home, and they are more likely to harm humans later in life. It is a warning sign that cannot be ignored but while there are lots of programmes teaching children to be kind and respectful in the US, there are few such initiatives in the UK.

Long-term aims

Dogs Helping Kids would like to see a country-wide standard for dogs in schools, with government backing and support. The long-term vision is to see a DHK school dog working in every school in the UK.

The charity has now launched its Ambassador Child Programme to educate the next generation of responsible dog owners. The 12-week course aims to teach children kind, positive training methods, how to stay safe around dogs, how to 'speak dog' and understand body language, and what it takes to be a good dog owner. If successful, it will be rolled out to all DHK dogs working in primary schools. ●

Find out more:

dogshelpingkids.co.uk



The story of Liam and Charlie

Five years ago, when Liam Landymore was just 13 years old, he was suffering from debilitating depression and anxiety, and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder following a very traumatic event when he was seven. Forward-fast just a few years and Liam is now a confident, happy 18-year-old who hopes to become a professional dog trainer. The reason for his remarkable transformation can be found in a cross-breed dog called Charlie and the work of Dogs Helping Kids.

Charlie had been due to undergo training as a Visiting School Dog with the charity, but founder Tracey Berridge said he could be a Personal Support School Dog for Liam instead – a first for the charity – if Liam was personally willing to train him. Since then Liam has demonstrated a natural gift for dog training, winning numerous awards and working with some of the world's top dog trainers. He is a teenage adviser for DHK and has even started his own business, Liam's MOB (Men on Board), which aims to encourage more men to adopt kind, positive training methods.