

Risk Assessment: Therapy Dog in School

Date: January 3, 2024

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Location: Horizons Independent School

Assessor: Roger Boulton / Director

Introduction: This risk assessment identifies potential hazards associated with a therapy dog's presence in the school and outlines control measures to minimize those risks.

Dog-Related Hazards:

- **Biting/Scratching:** Although unlikely with a properly trained therapy dog, there's a risk of students or staff being bitten or scratched, potentially leading to injury or infection. To mitigate this, the dog must be temperament assessed, obedience trained, and have a designated handler present at all times. Clear guidelines for interaction should be established (no pulling tail, ears, etc.), and a "time out" area should be available for the dog if needed. A first aid kit should be readily available.
- **Allergies/Asthma:** Some students or staff may have allergies or asthma triggered by the dog. To manage this, the school should inform everyone of the dog's presence and identify those with allergies. Alternative activities should be provided for those individuals, and the dog should be kept out of their classrooms or designated areas. Regular grooming can help minimize shedding.
- **Fear/Phobia:** Some individuals may have a fear or phobia of dogs, potentially leading to anxiety or panic attacks. To address this, the dog should be introduced gradually, and information about its role and purpose should be provided. Individuals should be allowed to choose their level of interaction, and a safe space should be available for those who are uncomfortable.
- **Hygiene:** There's a slight risk of germ transmission or disease. To minimize this, the dog must be fully vaccinated and regularly wormed and treated for fleas. Handwashing facilities should be readily available and encouraged after interaction. The dog should have a designated toileting area that is cleaned immediately.

Environment-Related Hazards:

- **Trips/Falls:** The dog's presence could potentially lead to trips or falls for students, staff, or the dog itself. This can be minimized by keeping the dog on a leash in busy areas, ensuring walkways are clear, and training the dog to walk calmly beside the handler.
- **Escape/Running Loose:** There's a risk of the dog escaping or running loose, potentially getting lost or causing a traffic accident. To prevent this, outdoor areas should be securely fenced, the dog should always be on a leash when outside designated areas, and it should wear an ID tag and be microchipped.
- **Unwanted Attention:** The dog may receive unwanted attention or become overstimulated in the busy school environment. This can be managed by establishing "quiet time" for the dog in a designated safe space and training the dog to be comfortable with different levels of noise and activity.

- **Damage to Property:** There's a small risk of the dog chewing or scratching school property. This can be minimized by providing appropriate chew toys and supervising the dog, particularly in new environments.

Other Considerations:

- **Insurance:** Ensure appropriate liability insurance is in place to cover any incidents involving the dog.
- **Emergency Procedures:** Develop procedures for handling dog-related incidents (e.g., bites, escapes, allergic reactions).
- **Communication:** Maintain clear communication with parents/staff about the dog's presence, schedule, and any changes to procedures.
- **Review:** This risk assessment should be reviewed regularly (e.g., termly) or as needed (e.g., after an incident).

Overall Conclusion: With appropriate control measures in place, the risks associated with a therapy dog in school can be effectively managed. The benefits of animal-assisted interventions in an educational setting often outweigh the potential risks.