

Puppy dog tales: working with children and animals

One setting in west Wales has been providing young children with opportunities to interact regularly with a dog called Honey, boosting self-esteem, independence, emotional stability, and much more.



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Bern Williams once said: 'No symphony orchestra ever played music like a two-year-old laughing with a puppy.' There is no doubt that animals fascinate children, and can bring much joy to their lives. This article explores how one setting in Wales has provided opportunities for young children to interact with dogs, and how this has fostered rich and varied educational opportunities.

It is story time at Ffrindiau Bach Tegryn nursery in Aberporth, west Wales. Ffrindiau Bach Tegryn is a Welsh-medium, part-time nursery for two to four-year-olds. Twelve children attend in the morning and 14 in the afternoon. There are three full-time staff members, including Wendy Davies, the manager.

In a familiar scene, the children gather excitedly on the carpet. While some are chatting and fidgeting, Honey Allen is sitting nicely, ready for the story to begin. She models good listening skills, and focuses on Wendy, the nursery manager, who praises her effort. 'Well done Honey, you are sitting very well'. Immediately there is a ripple around the carpet as all the children sit up like Honey. This kind of routine takes place in hundreds of settings every day. What is perhaps unusual is that Honey is not a typical three-year old child, but an 11-year old golden retriever with a fondness for sausages and liver cake.

Honey and her owners June and Mac Allen are part of an innovative scheme, 'Burns By Your Side' (BBYS; a branch of the Burns Pet Nutrition Foundation), which trains volunteer and companion dogs to visit schools and settings. The main aim of the scheme is to help children improve their literacy and communication skills, as well as developing their confidence and motivation to learn. The scheme is becoming increasingly popular – Honey is now one of over 20 well-trained dogs who visit nurseries, schools, libraries, and colleges in south Wales.

Animal-assisted interventions

Around the world, animal-assisted interventions are attracting widespread interest among educationalists and

others. Among available programmes are those that use horses with autistic children, goats alongside 'looked after children', and cats supporting children with social anxiety. However, programmes featuring dogs are the most popular interventions – for example, 'Reading Education Assistance Dogs', 'Classroom Canines', 'Tail Wagging' Tutors' (Therapy Dogs International) and 'The Bark and Read Foundation'.

What is the link between these programmes and effective early years practice? Pascal and Bertram (2000) identify core elements for early learning: 'Dispositions to learn; social competence, self-concept and emotional wellbeing.' Can an animal really make a difference to very young children's dispositions and skills?

Research suggests that interactions with animals can impact on social, emotional, behavioural, physical and cognitive outcomes for learners (for example, Purewall et al, 2017). For example, dogs have been found to contribute to children's emotional stability and to positive attitudes towards school, they can contribute to children's self-esteem by providing a 'friend' to bond with, and children may become more attentive, responsive and cooperative with an adult when a dog is present in the classroom (for example, Anderson and Olson, 2006; Limond et al, 1997; Zasloff and Hart, 1999).

Honey's story

Honey and June became involved in the BBYS scheme over 18 months ago. After initial suitability assessments, Honey underwent training and assessment to ensure that she is well mannered, calm and relaxed in the presence of children, unfamiliar adults and new contexts. This is true of all dogs and their owners who wish to be involved.

Once assessments are passed and DBS clearance obtained, the volunteers and their dogs are paired with local schools or settings who have expressed an interest. After an initial visit to discuss risk assessment, and to meet the whole school, the dogs visit on a regular basis – often once or twice a fortnight.

In some schools the dogs work with targeted children, but in Honey's case she is able to interact with all of the

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children in the nursery. While there are now more than 20 BBYS dogs, Honey was one of the first to pass the training, and she is the only Welsh 'speaking' dog on the team.

Impact on learning

Wendy has noted improvements in communication and language, physical development, and personal, social and emotional development in all 26 children since Honey has started visiting. These changes can be subtle, and sometimes transient, but nonetheless there are many examples of how Honey's presence has impacted positively on the children:

Social development

- Honey's positive relationships with the children help them to be confident and independent. One child has been identified as being on the autistic spectrum, and while he finds forming relationships with peers and adults difficult, he is keen to interact with Honey. On a recent visit, June observed him going to where Honey's treats are kept, selecting a piece of cheese and bringing it over to give to Honey. This was a calm and confident independent interaction, a big step forward for this child.
- Children at the nursery must learn to take turns to give Honey a treat. They take account of one another's ideas about how to organise their activity – for example, they organised their own rota for holding Honey's lead.
- They are encouraged to form positive relationships with June as well as Honey, and to show sensitivity to others' needs and feelings.

Emotional development

- Honey's presence is calming, and has helped children to manage and understand feelings. For instance, having Honey present has encouraged the children to talk about how they and others show their feelings. They are encouraged to be calm and quiet around Honey.
- Honey has recently had major surgery, and the children have learnt how this might have made her feel. Children are encouraged to be kind and gentle with Honey, and to consider her needs as well as their own.

Physical development

- Honey offers opportunities to consider health and self-care – for example, children can consider how she needs daily exercise and a suitable diet to be happy and healthy.
- The children are encouraged to manage their own basic hygiene and personal needs successfully, including washing their hands after playing with, or feeding, Honey.
- Honey brings her own bag with her, which includes her toothbrush, toothpaste and wipes – and through modelling the use of these the children can see how June helps Honey have good personal hygiene.



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Honey's positive relationships with the children help them be confident and independent

Cognitive development

- Honey's presence in the classroom also creates an enabling environment for learning – the children often invite Honey into different areas in the enhanced provision. When this happens, the children engage and communicate with her creatively – for example, when recently 'taking her shopping' in the role-play area. This meant the chance to explore a real-life context – talking about food and money, and exploring the language and routines involved in going to the shops.
- Honey provides a focus for purposeful talk. Children are often very keen to talk to and about her, and June has seen them whispering in Honey's ear.
- The nursery is a Welsh speaking setting, however, a proportion of the children who attend have limited Welsh when they start, so language and literacy development has a high priority. Opportunities to speak in, and listen to, Welsh are crucial, and Honey has proved to be a non-judgmental and willing listener.

Behavioural development

- Thinking about Honey has provided children the opportunity to talk about their own and others' behaviour, and its consequences. The children learn to adjust their behaviour to different situations – for example, they know not to run or shout when Honey is nearby.
- Wendy has seen a marked improvement in the behaviour of two boys who were reluctant to settle and

interact with their peers, and who showed little self-control. The difference when Honey visits is noticeable – they are much calmer and will move alongside other children to pat Honey – often leading to more consistent periods of interaction with peers.

Wider benefits

The impact of a visit also lasts beyond the nursery day, with many parents reporting that their children are keen to chat about Honey when they get home. They are also excited when they know Honey will visit, and are eager to get to the nursery to see her. Parents themselves are enthusiastic about the initiative, and come to talk to Wendy and her team about Honey – fostering positive communication channels between home and setting.

Honey also has an important role in helping the children learn to be safe around dogs. There are over eight million dogs in the UK, and sadly not all interactions with them are positive. In 2015, the NHS recorded over 7,000 incidences of dog bites and strikes, with children younger than 10 being most likely to be bitten.

Learning how to approach, interact and understand dogs is, therefore, a vital life skill. The children are taught how to approach a dog, basic canine body language signals and how they must never approach an unknown dog.

Conclusion

Animal assisted interventions are increasing in popularity. Although researchers acknowledge that there is a need for a more systematic and robust evidence base, there is a growing body of research to suggest that interactions with animals can support a wide range of development.

Bringing an animal into your setting could be an exciting, motivating and valuable approach to consider. But we urge a note of caution. These interventions must be carefully planned, monitored and regulated, and must view the animal as a sentient being – not a teaching tool or educational fad. BBYS carefully considers legal, ethical and risk factors for the school, but also ensures that the welfare needs of the dog are paramount – for example, when considering the length of sessions involving direct contact time with the children.

The RSPCA is opposed to all schemes that introduce animals into educational establishments, which are detrimental to the welfare of animals, or where they are used largely for entertainment and are not part of a clearly defined programme of study. BBYS works with volunteers and schools to ensure that they are 'animal friendly' establishments. These do more than just teach about animals – they encourage teachers and children to think about animals' needs and to develop a sense of care and responsibility for them.

June is quick to point out that she watches Honey carefully to ensure that she is relaxed and comfortable during her visits, and would not take her should she appear anxious or stressed in any way. Luckily for the staff and children, Honey still appears delighted to be a member of the team, and is happy to make regular visits to the nursery – spreading a little tail-wagging magic wherever she goes. **eye**

Useful resources

- Anderson K, Olson M (2006) 'The value of a dog in a classroom of children with severe emotional disorders'; in *Anthrozoos* **19** (1) pp 35-49.
- Burns By Your Side – <http://burnsbyyourside.org>
- Lewis H (2017) 'Tales with Tails: how can reading with dogs improve pupil outcomes and motivation?'; in *English* **4-11** 60 pp 11-13
- Limond J, Bradshaw J, Cormack K (1997) 'Behavior of children with learning disabilities interacting with a therapy dog'; in *Anthrozoos* **10** (2/3) pp 84-9
- Pascal C, Bertram T (2000) *Accounting early for life-long learning: Phase 2 report*. Amber Publications: Worcester
- Purewall R, et al (2017) 'Companion Animals and Child/Adolescent Development: A Systematic Review of the Evidence'; in *International Journal of Environmental Research Public Health* **14** (3) p 234
- Zasloff R, Hart L (1999) 'Animals in elementary school education in California'; in *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* **2** (4) p 347

Key points

- There is no doubt that animals fascinate children, and can bring much joy to their lives
- Animal assisted interventions are increasing in popularity. Although researchers acknowledge that there is a need for a more systematic and robust evidence base, there is a growing body of research to suggest that interactions with animals can support a wide range of development