

PET THERAPY

Animals bring joy, calm and even improve learning outcomes. Absolutely Education spoke to schools about their pets' therapy superpowers

Wellington College

PET THERAPIST: COCO

Variety: Chocolate brown Springador (Springer Spaniel-Labrador cross)

Coco joined Wellington College in September 2021 and she's based in the Modern Foreign Languages department with her owner, Head of MFL Dr Rachelle Kirkham. Coco attends all Spanish lessons, greeting students when they arrive and then lying quietly in her bed until the end of class, when she gets up to say goodbye to them all. She can do commands (sit, paw, down, high five, etc) in three languages. Alongside her human pals, she has a lot of toys – Paddington being her favourite – which she's keen to show to everyone. Coco has her own email address at Wellington, where students and staff can request a personal visit.

Coco has a natural aptitude as a pet therapist, says Rachelle Kirkham, and has been in training since she was eight weeks old. She still has regular training visits from experts at CAL (Canine Assisted Learning) and it's hoped she will move from 'assistance dog in training' to fully qualified school

assistance dog this summer. "There are lots of assessments both for Coco and me as handler."

So what does Coco add to school life? "She has the best role in the school – basically to help everyone feel happy! Her role is primarily to support the wellbeing of our students by offering sessions where they can come and play, cuddle or stroke her and talk through things that are on their mind," says Rachelle Kirkham. "Coco is always pleased to see everyone and it takes us a long time to get anywhere."

It's not just students who request meetings. Coco is a regular in staff departments (particularly IT and the Library). Rachelle Kirkham says there's lots of evidence about the power of stroking a dog to relieve stress – and there's an added benefit in a boarding school, where students may sometimes miss their own animals. Coco is especially useful to students during Year 11 and 12 oral exams. "She goes and sits next to them, puts her head on their lap or paw on their knee and it really helps them at a time of high stress."

As to the joy she brings: there's no question about it. "Even on my worst days, seeing Coco never fails to make me smile and brighten my mood," says one student. "Coco is the absolute best thing about Wellington," adds another.



RIGHT
Hanford has lots of animals to love and care for

"HANFORD GIRLS HEAD TO THE STABLES TO HELP WITH THE PONIES, VISIT THE GUINEA PIGS, FEED THE CHICKENS OR WALK A DOG ROUND THE GROUNDS"

Wells Cathedral School

PET THERAPIST: RIO

Variety: Huntaway-Collie cross

Rio is a rescue dog from Bath Cats and Dogs Home who loves nothing more than spending time with people, chasing tennis balls, eating salmon and ear-scratches. Although he had a difficult start to life, his new owner soon recognised his strengths of calmness and balance. Pets as Therapy had Rio assessed as a therapy dog – he passed with flying colours.

Fully qualified, he started visiting Wells on a weekly basis back in 2017 and has been a star member of visiting staff ever since. "Rio is a huge part of the Prep staff; his presence is so calming," says one member of the team. "The security of his presence and the calmness he brings to all is wonderful. He is also the best listener."

Staff say that the minute Rio enters the classroom, pupils' demeanour changes. After the initial excitement of seeing him, the atmosphere in the room becomes calmer thanks to his presence. They say the children love to sit on the bean bag and read to Rio and he is extremely pleased to lie next to them, listen to their stories and watch their confidence improving. Staff have noticed that Rio also seems to sense when a particular pupil might be having a challenging day and will make a beeline – going to lie by their feet as they complete schoolwork. Alongside his prep duties, he has special visits with a pupil in the senior school who uses this



ABOVE
Rio has a calm nature and loves ear scratches

BELOW
Coco has her own email address at Wellington

time as a form of therapy.

Rio especially enjoys the weekly 'Walking with Rio' club, where a group of pupils explore walks around Wells, enjoy the fresh air and learn about responsible dog ownership. He also accompanies staff to Claver Morris, Wells' prep boarding house, which is a lovely experience for all boarders, but especially those who might be missing their own pets at home.

Pupils at Wells see Rio as part of school life and a great source of comfort. As one puts it: "When I first see Rio I feel so warm as he's so fluffy and happy – I love dogs so much." Another adds. "I love dogs and especially Rio. I am so happy I still get to see him, even when I am in the senior school. I feel calm and happy when I am with him."

Hanford School

PET THERAPIST: NUMEROUS

Variety: Includes ponies, guinea pigs, dogs and cats

Pet therapy has long been in the mix at Hanford. There are too many names to list, with some 25 ponies, many dogs, one pig, two cats, five guinea pigs and a growing population of chickens (five chicks hatched just recently).

The Dorset boarding school has always been a destination for pony-mad girls, but also welcomes non-riders, who might like to learn or just enjoy pony company. The sheer variety of animals at the school means something for everyone. The animal companions they share their lives with



"WELLINGTON RESIDENT COCO HAS PICKED UP LANGUAGE SKILLS AND CAN DO ALL COMMANDS – SIT, PAW, DOWN, HIGH FIVE – IN THREE LANGUAGES"



ABOVE
Pony time at Hanford

RIGHT
Kanga is valued by all the pupils and staff at Francis Holland

"AT THE START OF EACH SCHOOL YEAR, KANGA'S THERAPY ROLE AT FRANCIS HOLLAND IS PARTICULARLY VALUABLE AS SHE HELPS EVERYONE NEW SETTLE IN"



Francis Holland School

PET THERAPIST: KANGA
Variety: Hungarian Vizsla

are a huge part of pupils' enjoyment, and remembered years down the line. Old girls become misty eyed at the memory of their animal friends – and especially the experience of riding before the start of the school day. "I can still remember the excitement of being woken early for a morning ride and having breakfast in riding clothes afterwards!" says alumna Arabella. "My favourite part of school life," adds Harriet.

All the pupils have part of every day left untimetabled. It is their time to do as they choose, whether it's reading a book, playing a game, climbing a tree or building a den. In fact, that's when many of them make a beeline for the animals, heading to the stables to help with the ponies, visit the guinea pigs, feed the chickens or walk a dog around the grounds. The school says it's important that young people not only get the benefits of the animals, but also understand the responsibilities that come with having them around – and that includes mucking out, cleaning out and exercising.

But the extra support they bring is also recognised. "When we have exams and I am feeling super stressed, I run and hug a pony and it makes all the difference," says one pupil. "The guinea pigs are adorable, so cute and gentle. It is fun to go and visit them with your friends and have a chat – there's such a cosy atmosphere in the stables," says another.

At Francis Holland School, life is made happier by Kanga, a trained therapy dog who belongs to the school's Lead Counsellor Zoe. She has been at FHS for four years, having begun her training as a pet therapist when she was just a puppy. She is considered a key member of the team at ContemPlace, the school's counselling service, working alongside five therapists within the Wellbeing Suite. Students and staff can visit her during the school day for a chat, a pat or to tell her their worries.

Vizslas are renowned for their affectionate nature, says Zoe, and have earned the nickname 'Velcro dogs' for their loyalty. Kanga is happy to spread her affection wide and many girls will come to lie down next to her for a few minutes to boost their mood. Zoe says stroking an animal helps create a sense of calm – particularly useful for any student who is feeling anxious. This helps girls 'reset' their emotional state and the rest of their day becomes much more manageable.

At the beginning of the academic year, Kanga helps pupils starting at FHS to settle in. She's on hand for everyone from Reception children missing their parents to

Year 7 girls feeling overwhelmed by the step up to secondary school. A side benefit is that many friendships are forged when children gather to meet the resident pet therapist.

During exam periods, she is also on hand to save the day, helping to soothe anyone finding the stress too much. One especially popular therapy service is 'walk and talk', where girls take a short stroll round Chelsea with Kanga and a counsellor – often that's all it takes to restore perspective.

Staff say Kanga offers a good way for some students to explore the idea of counselling. They drop-in to see her and then find themselves opening up to one of the counsellors. They have realised that if you're stroking a dog you don't have to look the person you are talking to in the eye – making it much easier to broach difficult subjects. For all the children at FHS, Kanga is a reassuring confidant. "I love Kanga's ears – they're so soft and they listen to all the worries I tell them," says one. "Visiting Kanga is the highlight of my day. She is unfailingly calm and peaceful," adds another. **P**