



PUPILS WITH THERAPY DOG KANGA

A dog's LIFE

At Francis Holland School, therapy dog Kanga is a reassuring confidant for pupils of all ages

By LIBBY NORMAN



KANGA

At Francis Holland School in Sloane Square, 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 eight weeks old. She is considered a key member of the team at ContemPlace, the school's counselling service, working alongside five specialist 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 and loving temperament, says Zoe, and have earned the nickname 'velcro dogs' for their loyalty to their human companion. But Kanga is happy to spread her affection wider and many girls will come to lie down next to her for a few minutes to boost their mood. Zoe notes that stroking an animal

helps create a sense of calm – particularly useful for any student who is feeling anxious or has neurosensory needs. 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 and find their feet. 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.

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During exam periods she is also on hand to save the day, helping to calm anyone finding the stress a bit overwhelming. One especially popular therapy service is 'walk and talk', where girls take a short stroll round the streets of Chelsea with Kanga and a counsellor – often that's all it takes to restore perspective and calm those pre-exam jitters.

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. 🐾