

# TAKING THE LEAD

From sideline supporters to canine counsellors, **Laura Sutherland** meets the four-legged friends making school life more fun and fulfilling than ever before



**QUEEN QUILA**  
LUDGROVE'S HEADMASTER'S  
DOG ENJOYS PLENTY OF  
PLAYTIME WITH BOARDERS

**F**rom trained therapy dogs to cuddly companions offering moments of joy during a long day of lessons, pups are being enrolled into schools across the capital and beyond.

And with claimed benefits including improved attendance, reduced anxiety and enriched cognitive development – not to mention the cuteness factor – there's much to recommend having a dog on campus.

We think of dogs as man's best friend, but can you imagine 188 children sharing one canine charge? Grimsdell's school dog Holly can claim that level of popularity. Deputy head Jenny Ticehurst's cavapoo settled into the north-west London pre-prep seamlessly just as Covid-19 restrictions began to lift. With

anxious youngsters returning to or starting school in the throes of a pandemic, Holly established herself as a soother of wobbly chins, wearer of super-cute costumes and helpful distraction for those struggling to settle into school life.

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Nowadays, her packed timetable includes two-to-three nursery visits a week, outdoor play during forest school lessons and one-on-one sessions in the office's chill-out corner. "She's very good-natured, which means that we can also teach the children how to behave around animals," Ticehurst says. She may sound like a star pupil, she still has her naughty moments: "When Holly's off the lead she makes a beeline for the nursery to see what snacks might have been dropped on the floor," laughs Ticehurst. "She's still a dog, after all."

Although Holly's well suited to her under-eight audience, students of all ages can have their education enriched by a four-legged confidante. Francis Holland School Sloane Square, an all-through girls' day school in Chelsea, is home to fully trained therapy dog, Kanga. The much-beloved Hungarian vizsla has been part of FHS's ContemPlace team for four years.

While autumn term is particularly busy for her with helping newcomers adjust, her role during exam periods is crucial. Senior students often take the opportunity to walk and talk with Kanga and a therapist around the streets of south-west London, relieving stress and

**PRE-PREP PUP**  
HOLLY THE CAVAPOO  
IS NOW ONE OF  
GRIMSDELL'S FAVOURITE  
FACULTY MEMBERS



restoring a sense of perspective at a tense time. She also provides a route for children to explore therapy, with some girls dropping in to pet her and then finding themselves opening up to one of the counsellors.

"It's well documented that stroking an animal can release endorphins, which helps create a sense of calm within the individual. This is particularly pertinent for those students who may be suffering from anxiety or have neurosensory needs," explains the school's lead counsellor Zoe Juniper, Kanga's owner. "Vizslas are known as 'Velcro' dogs because they're affectionate and rarely leave your side. For some of the girls, the simple

act of lying down with Kanga makes them feel better."

Meanwhile, at Berkshire boarding school, Ludgrove, a veritable village of pups are on hand to give its prep-age boys comfort as they settle into fortnights away from home. Headmaster Simon Barber's dog, Quila is the leader of the pack and relishes this role, often greeting visitors at the front door, sitting with a boy while he calls his parents and observing games sessions.

House parents' dogs – including Libby the spaniel (p61) and Ringo the labrador – also provide canine comradery, from cuddling up to boys while they drink their nightly cocoa to joining Welly Walks and woofing sideline support to players on match days. Barber says: "Dogs add to the family feel of the school. It's important that our boys feel that Ludgrove is their home and living alongside well-behaved dogs aids that."

Friend, therapist, family member – a school dog wears many collars, but Grimsdell teaching assistant Azeroo Noobakhsh puts it best: "A dog not only helps children with their emotional and social needs; it also instils values, such as understanding, love and care." ■ [fhs-sw1.org.uk](http://fhs-sw1.org.uk); [ludgrove.net](http://ludgrove.net); [millhill.org.uk](http://millhill.org.uk)



**HANG WITH KANGA**  
FRANCIS HOLLAND SLOANE  
SQUARE'S GIRLS CAN  
CONFIDE IN THE TRAINED  
THERAPY DOG KANGA