



T4 Trust

## **DOG POLICY**

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## **1. Introduction**

Most of our students have been excluded from mainstream education and often from several schools. They have a history of non-attendance and have failed to engage not just with learning but with the institution of school.

When a student is awarded a place at Ian Mikardo High School our first aim is to get them to attend. We do this by creating a warm, welcoming, open environment in which we build positive and respectful relationships. Creative design ensures that the building doesn't feel like a traditional school and the presence of a dog is part of this thinking.

Following the departure of Flurry, many students have asked the Senior Leadership Team if they could have a dog.

IMHS is proud to welcome our new Therapy Dog "**Marge**"

Marge will share an office with the Head of Post 16 & Careers and will help to provide an acknowledgement of the warmth, comfort and uncomplicated companionship that a dog can bring to vulnerable students. The benefit of animals in the lives of people who have health problems (our students have mental health problems) or who have difficulty forming relationships is well documented in medical literature. Regular contact with animals has been shown to make children calmer, better able to concentrate and more co-operative, and studies show that children with strong attachments to pets rate higher on measures of empathy and social skills.

This means that the presence of a well-trained and good tempered dog can modify disruptive behaviour, reduce friction and increase attendance. It has been found to enhance cohesiveness and order in an environment and some research advocates that having pets stimulates the immune system. Conversely young people's poor attachment, negative attitudes and cruelty towards animals correlate with less empathy and weaker social skills.

For many of our students, the school's dog is their first healthy relationship and may be their first friend. For a boy who has difficulty engaging with human beings and who has experienced multiple rejections, to be able to stroke a dog, or walk her through the school grounds is a sign of acceptance. The dog's presence contributes to the student's feeling that the school is a place where they want to be. If school is difficult to access and a student doesn't know how to begin to form a respectful relationship with a person, a dog may be the enticement she needs to walk into the building and keep going back.

## **2. Aims**

This policy aims to:

- Encourage happy and healthy relations with the dog
- Support student behaviour in a positive way

## **3. Definitions**

The Trust Board	The board of directors of the Trust (including any committee of the board duly appointed by it), who may also be referred to as trustees
The Headteacher	The teacher in charge of the school who may also be referred to as head, executive head or principle

#### **4. The dog's place in the school**

The school's ethos revolves around forming respectful relationships which encourage students to become more reflective. At Ian Mikardo, the Headteacher is central to this and is available and accessible to students throughout the school day for informal discussions as well as more formal sessions about their academic progress or conflict resolution. If they have a worry, they are welcome to approach and talk to the headteacher directly. This can diffuse a potentially inflammatory situation and help to make the student feel safe. An exchange with the Headteacher is empowering for young people who have been rejected throughout their lives and it helps them to understand that authority figures are not their oppressors and can be their supporters.

The dog helps to facilitate this relationship by making the school an interesting and even more welcoming place to be. As a transient object, the dog helps them to get to know members of the SLT and build on their confidence, show affection by stroking the dog and then take her for a walk in the school grounds. This can lead to play – Marge likes to join in with football and other ball games, attend lessons, meetings and community activities such as Forest School.

The windows between the Headteacher's office and the corridor mean that they can see if a student is outside the office and they emphasise the nature of the office as an accessible sanctuary for students who feel unsafe or who want to talk and be listened to. This gives each student a voice as an individual and eases processes such as conflict resolution because students recognise the office as a bolthole. It is not unusual for a student who has been bullied or assaulted to spend time in the Headteacher's office, playing with the dog, while arrangements are made for the perpetrator to leave the site.

#### **5. The dog's place in learning throughout the school**

Caring for a dog can teach young people a great deal about human behaviour and body language, and in particular about forming positive relationships. For young people who live in chaotic families, learning to care for an animal is often their first step towards learning to care for others. Contact with a well-trained and good tempered dog can:

- Expose them to the elements of a good relationship, and help them to identify and understand these elements
- Develop parenting skills, help children to practice thinking outside themselves, thinking about others and becoming responsible for another's welfare and wellbeing
- Develop social responsibility
- Help to explain some of the questions children have about life and death
- Encourage the moral, spiritual and personal development of the child
- Provide a strong sense of emotional support

- Help children to regulate distressing feelings
- Observing and listening to a dog's needs gives children opportunities to develop empathy and the ability to pay attention to another human being.

Children often find relationships with animals easier to understand than relationships with people. Pets have more consistent behavioural cues and generally exude constant positive regard. Children often have more control over a relationship with a pet than with other members of their family and older children may become primary caretakers. Through this, pets provide an emotionally safe testing ground in which to practice relationship skills and young people may find it easier to discuss their relationships with pets than their relationships with people. Giving them the opportunity to assess and understand these relationships, and helping them to link them to their interactions with people, can help to set the stage for better relating with others throughout their lives.

For children who don't have pets in their lives at home, learning about these relationships and practicing basic skills, such as cleaning up after a dog, and understanding the perspectives of others is arguably more important than it is for those who are familiar with a pet.

The dog is also a potential source of creative teaching in the classroom:

- Science – sound and hearing, health and growth, moving and growing, life cycles, interdependence and adaptation
- Maths – projects, costings etc
- Art – to stimulate creative work
- English – poems, essays and drama
- PSHE – a metaphor for people, aspects of social, emotional and personal education.

## **6. The dog, parental consent and Muslim students**

Some children may have suppressed immune systems that make them susceptible to infection and their parents may prefer them not to have contact with a dog. Or parents may take this view for religious reasons. At Ian Mikardo we work hard to keep students healthy and we respect cultural differences. Whatever a parent's reasoning, if they do not wish their son to have contact with the dog, staff will ensure that this is respected.

Marge is a female French bulldog.

Having a well-trained dog in the school does not compromise students' health or the faith of students from the Bangladeshi community because the dog does not engage with people who do not engage with her. Some students from liberal Muslim families may be happy to stroke her, and are able to make that choice as individuals.

## **7. Health and safety**

Basic hygiene – washing hands after handling the dog – should be observed by staff and students at all times. Staff should ensure that the dog is always handled gently. Staff training on the dog's involvement in the school takes place as appropriate.

## **8. Marge**

Marge had tough life before being adopted by the Head of Post 16 & Careers at 7 months old and has been since raised as a Therapy dog. Having a therapy dog in the school means that the students can immediately recognise that the dog is a kindred spirit, and this encourages them to regard her as a companion.

For students who are upset and may be unable to talk to a person, stroking the dog even for a short time has a notable calming effect. This is helpful during conflict resolution, and can help to cut tension in meetings involving staff and students.

The constant presence of the dog is also a way of lightening the atmosphere in an environment where mental health problems and painful responses to trauma are ever-present. Throughout the school we strive to create a mood that is nurturing and, where appropriate, playful and fun. Marge lies at the heart of this and makes a significant contribution to the on-going laughter at Ian Mikardo. The offer of an uncomplicated and understandable relationship is likely to be a unique experience for many of our students, and can be the source of great pleasure.

## **9. Monitoring and reviewing**

This policy will be reviewed and updated in accordance with the Trust policy review schedule and from time to time may be updated more frequently in response to changes in guidance, legislation or under instruction from the Trust.

## **10. Links with other policies**

This policy links in with the following policies:

- Health and Safety Policy
- Equality Information and Objectives