

April 2020

Our Ref: CR / AL

Dear Parents / Carers

We are writing to let you know of some exciting news for St Thomas's Centre. As some of you may already be aware, we now have two school dogs named Pixie and Bonnie. They are two Bichon Frise puppies aged 10 months old. Pixie and Bonnie will be trained to become a certified 'Therapy Dogs' and their health, obedience and temperament will be regularly tested.

Pixie and Bonnie belong to Mrs Amanda Leaver our Business Manager and Miss Charlotte Leaver our SENCa, and will be only coming into school for short sessions initially. We will obviously be caring for Pixie and Bonnie out of school and will be taking full responsibility for them, but other staff will be taking them for sessions during the school day however no children will be working with them until they have passed their accreditation.

We have undertaken a significant amount of research and are aware of many benefits to having a school dog including.

- Cognitive – companionship with a dog stimulates memory, problem-solving and game-playing
- Social – a dog provides a positive mutual topic for discussion, encourages responsibility, wellbeing and focused interaction with others.
- Emotional – a school dog improves self-esteem, acceptance from others and lifts mood, often provoking laughter and fun. Dogs can also teach compassion and respect for other living things as well as relieving anxiety.
- Physical – interaction with a dog reduces blood pressure, provides tactile stimulation, assists with pain management, gives motivation to move, walk and stimulates the senses.
- Environmental – a dog in a school increases the sense of a family environment, with all of the above benefits continuing long after the school day is over.
- Reading – reading to dogs has been proven to help children develop literacy skills and build confidence, through both the calming effect the dog's presence has on children as well as the fact that a dog will listen to children read without being judgemental or critical. This



comforting environment helps to nurture children's enthusiasm for reading and provides them with the confidence to read aloud.

Pixie and Bonnie's main place of residence will be in the office area, which is secure and separate from the classrooms. As Pixie and Bonnie are still only young they will slowly be introduced to the school community and we will begin by introducing them to small numbers of children. Once they are accredited all children will have the opportunity to interact with our school dogs as they begin to visit more classrooms. Whilst moving around the school, Pixie and Bonnie will be kept on short leads and will always be with an adult.

Please understand that we will do everything we can to reassure children who are fearful and that under no circumstances will they be forced to meet with Pixie or Bonnie. If you do not wish your child to interact with Pixie and Bonnie, please inform the school office. We also recognise that some children have allergies to animals; we ask that you notify us if this is the case for your child and we will ensure that they will not be in an environment that Pixie and Bonnie have been in.

We hope the children will gain a great deal of enjoyment from having their school dogs and that they becomes an established part of life at St Thomas's Centre. However, should you have any queries or questions on the matter then please do not hesitate to contact school.

Yours Sincerely,

Mrs Charlotte Rolfe
Head of Lower School



School Dog

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Q Who is the legal owner of the dog and who pays for its costs?

A. The legal owner of the dog will be Mrs Amanda Leaver and Miss Charlotte Leaver who will care for the dogs out of school hours and will pay for any costs associated with them.

Q Has a risk assessment been undertaken?

A. Yes, we have carefully considered having a dog in school and sought advice from many sources, including other schools that successfully have a school dog.

Q Who is responsible for training?

A. Mrs Amanda Leaver and Miss Charlotte Leaver will be responsible for Pixie and Bonnie's training. Appropriate professional training will also be obtained.

Q What about children who are allergic to dogs?

A. We already manage a number of allergies at school and this will be no different for children and adults that are allergic to dogs. Individual needs will always be met and we are happy to work with parents to put additional control measures in place for individual allergies.

Q My child is frightened of dogs; how will you manage this?

A. Access to the dogs is carefully managed and supervised and children do not need to have regular, close contact with the school dog. We hope to work closely with parents of children who are fearful of dogs to alleviate their fear and to teach them how to manage this.

