

A School Dog as a Possible Component of Balance4Life

For Balance4Life, it is particularly interesting that encounters with the dog can be linked to topics such as stress regulation, mindfulness, responsibility, relationship-building, and the perception and respect of one's own boundaries and those of others.

There are many possible ways to use a school dog: a school dog can accompany lessons, be integrated into projects and extracurricular clubs, or support learning coaching and reading development. Responsible interaction with animals, as well as their body language and needs, can themselves become subjects of learning.

Opportunities of Animal-Assisted Education

01 Emotional support	02 Promotion of social skills	03 Increased motivation	04 Increased concentration
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A school dog can support these areas in particular and thereby contribute to a positive learning climate.

Opportunities - but Not Without Limits

The mere presence of a dog does not in itself create an educational effect. A school dog remains a living being with its own needs and boundaries. A fundamental principle therefore applies: contact is always voluntary - for both humans and animals. No one has to interact with the dog, and the dog also decides whether contact takes place.

Responsible use also includes hygiene and preventive health care, insurance coverage, clear rules, appropriate working times, and a protected retreat area.

Experiences with Pinky as a School Dog

For Pinky, school is a place she very much enjoys coming to. She regularly accompanies her handler in lessons and occasionally in extracurricular clubs. Her most important role so far can probably best be described as "Good-Mood Officer": Pinky brings many spontaneous smiles and small positive moments to children and adults alike during the school day.

The enjoyment is clearly mutual. Pinky is greeted enthusiastically, receives plenty of cuddles, and visibly enjoys the attention - including trusting belly rubs. "Cute" is probably by far the most common description, closely followed by requests to "borrow" Pinky or, ideally, to have a Pinky of one's own. She has now become something of a small, unofficial star of the school.

Behind these pleasant encounters, however, there are also educationally interesting experiences. Many children find contact with Pinky calming and stress-reducing. A brief encounter, a few minutes sitting together, or extended petting can become small islands of calm during the school day. Pinky sometimes becomes a source of comfort - without needing to know, explain, or judge anything. This "therapeutic petting" visibly seems to do both sides good.

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The experiences with children who were initially afraid of or uncertain around dogs are especially valuable. For some, fears have already been noticeably reduced through repeated, voluntary encounters and growing trust in the fluffy four-legged companion. Others still keep their distance but show interest, observe Pinky, and look for their own way of making contact. This, too, is part of the process: no one has to touch Pinky - closeness, distance, and pace can be determined individually.

At the same time, Pinky creates many natural learning opportunities. The children learn to perceive an animal's body language and needs, interpret signals, and respect boundaries. This repeatedly creates bridges to human interaction: How can I tell that someone needs some peace and quiet? How do I show that something is becoming too much for me? Why should closeness never simply be demanded? And what do humans and animals need in order to feel safe and comfortable?

Our experiences so far show one thing above all: Pinky's impact is often found in the small, everyday encounters. She brings joy and calm into school life, provides emotional support, creates connection, and at the same time offers opportunities to learn about mindfulness, needs, and respectful interaction. For us, this is precisely her special contribution to Balance4Life.

How Is a School Dog Trained?

Not every friendly family dog is suitable for school. Professional qualification therefore considers the human-dog team. In addition to their educational qualifications, the dog handler needs knowledge of behavior, signs of stress, health, and the dog's needs. The dog itself must be physically and temperamentally suitable, handled safely, and closely bonded to its primary caregiver.

Qualification includes socialization, relaxation and calmness training, temperament and suitability assessment, theory and specialist knowledge, as well as practical training.

Introducing a dog into a school also takes time. At Margot-Friedländer-Gymnasium, this included, among other things, involving school committees, informing the school community, taking allergies and fears into account, coordinating with the relevant authorities, and allowing the dog to become accustomed to the school environment gradually.

Interested in Having a School Dog of Your Own?

Anyone considering using a school dog should first ask: What educational objective is the dog intended to support - and can a dog make a responsible contribution to that objective?

Because terms such as "school dog" or "school dog training" do not in themselves guarantee a uniform qualification, training programs should be carefully reviewed with regard to their content and quality standards. For teachers in Hesse, the professional development catalogue of the State of Hesse and the Hessian Teacher Academy provides useful guidance for finding appropriately accredited professional development programs.