

Classroom Management and the Teacher's Pet

Peer conflict. Aggression. Out-of-seat behavior.

The day-to-day issues in an elementary classroom are as varied as the strategies for managing them. So what works, and what doesn't, and why?

We would venture that there are almost as many answers—from token economies to timeouts—as there are practitioners in the field. But here's an interesting study: When a friendly, well-trained dog is introduced into an elementary-school classroom, teaching conditions improve considerably. Students as a whole become less hyperactive, less aggressive, and more attentive to their instructor. The dog, by her very presence, becomes an effective classroom management tool.

About the Study

The 2002 study ["Behavioral effects of the presence of a dog in a classroom," *Anthrozoös* 16 (2), 2003], conducted by Kurt Kotrschal and Brita Ortbauer, took place in Vienna. Four months into the school year, after a social dynamic had been established in the classroom, the two researchers began observing a multicultural class taught by Veronika Poszvek. The group comprised 24 boys and girls with a mean age of 6.7 years. Most students' families had recently immigrated to Austria and faced a language barrier. In part because of the diverse ethnic backgrounds of Poszvek's students, teaching was a challenge.

Over a monthlong control period, the class was videotaped during standard "open teaching situations," in which students completed learning tasks without necessarily remaining in their seats. This was followed by a one-month experimental period in which a dog was present in the classroom every day, for the full day. At the outset, students were taught about the dog's needs and shown how to care for the animal. During open teaching situations, they were free to interact with the dog except when she was on her mat.

Three dogs were used alternately: a male retriever, a female husky, and a female crossbreed. Two were certified therapy dogs, all three had gentle dispositions, and all belonged to Poszvek.

The results are intriguing.



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Staying Power

You could reasonably expect that a living, moving, furry presence in the classroom would distract children, redirecting their attention from their teacher and their tasks. Kids might behave more disruptively as a way of getting the animal's or classmates' attention or because of the sheer novelty of the situation. In Kotrschal and Ortbauer's study, however, neither scenario played out.

The research found that having a dog in the classroom actually *decreased* behavioral extremes, making the diverse group more homogenous. Children were less engaged in loud, conspicuous, or troublesome behavior. They paid more attention to their teacher, cooperated better, and communicated more intensely with one another.

Improvements in social behavior were more pronounced in boys than in girls, perhaps because girls showed less boisterous, "rough-and-tumble" activity to begin with. The researchers also speculate that the teacher's authority increased, particularly with respect to certain male students, in the presence of her compliant, obedient dog.

Although behavioral data were not collected after the two-month period ended, Veronika Poszvek continued to bring her dogs to school the following year. She reported that the effects observed in the study were lasting and long-term.

A Dog in Every Classroom?



Courtesy of M. Smith

Like many teachers, Margie Smith, a special education instructor in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, had trouble with the noise level in her classroom. Rude language and fights were common among her fifth- and sixth-graders. One day, Smith brought her cat, Beamer, to school. Taking cues from his body language, students found that Beamer interacted more with them when

they were calm and quiet. It is a lesson, Smith says, they carried into their treatment of one another. "With Beamer around," she says, "the kids settle in and play better together."

But can every teacher bring her pet to school? And *should* she? Though Kotrschal and Ortbauer suggest that dogs are a cheap, easy means of gaining control in the classroom, pets are in fact neither cheap nor easy. There are many factors to consider before bringing any animal into the classroom. For example:

- Do students have the self-control and maturity to humanely handle a pet?
- Could the animal pose a health or safety threat? Will the school accept liability?
- Does the classroom have an appropriate space for an animal, away from heavy traffic areas? Is it the best place for a pet to spend his days?

For a checklist and a more thorough discussion of animals in the classroom, see "Is a Classroom Pet for You?" This brochure is available at www.nahee.org.



Unleash the Potential

All things considered, a classroom pet—a dog in particular—isn't a practical option for most teachers. Still, there are ways of involving students with animals and reaping the social and educational benefits of those interactions.

In schools and libraries across the country, reading assistance dogs instill confidence in reluctant readers. Kids who are normally too intimidated to read aloud enjoy practicing on their four-legged friends, who never laugh at their mistakes. Other students pair up with therapy dogs by training them for agility tests. Working with dogs helps many children and adolescents overcome physical limitations or emotional and social difficulties, such as shyness, anxiety, or aggression.

We urge you to explore any number of possibilities for strengthening the bond between children and companion animals while also helping your students become more thoughtful, capable, compassionate citizens. For more information, contact The Humane Society of the United States (www.hsus.org), Delta Society's Pet Partners® program (www.deltasociety.org), or your local humane society.