

ANIMAL ATTRACTION

Rather than seeing them as a distraction, schools are embracing pets in the classroom – and pupils are the big winners

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For those lucky enough to have had family pets growing up, it's probably likely that you'll have plenty of happy memories of interacting with them. Thanks to my father's love of the exotic, I had a tortoise, budgies, fish and a snake during my younger years – but it was my beloved pet dog, Major, that meant the most to me. A lively, slobbering Boxer, there are lots of pictures of me as a child with my arms flung around the poor dog, but as I got older and started to encounter unfamiliar feelings of stress, peer pressure and growing pains, he always seemed to be there to listen and comfort me (surely nothing to do with the fact he learnt doing so would earn him a Bonio biscuit), and even though he could never respond to my questions, it helped nonetheless.

It's unsurprising then, looking at 21st century schooling, that pets have been welcomed into classrooms, with dogs ahead of the pack. 'The presence of dogs in the classroom helps to make the school feel more like a home from home, offering comfort to boys who can at



Above and below: Dogs are an important part of life at Aysgarth School

times miss home,' says Aysgarth School's head of boarding, Paul Barlow. 'Having the ability to go for a dog walk with pupils provides an ideal environment to support otherwise difficult conversations.'

Head of skills development at the school, Susanna Ogden, elaborates on dogs' importance in the classroom. 'The dogs are non-judgemental, they help to soothe and relax the pupils, freeing them from any anxiety and enabling them to progress both academically and socially. Children with learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, often have to work twice as hard

as their peers in the classroom. This can lead to a lack of confidence and low self-esteem. Dogs in the classroom and around school gives these pupils a moment to relax, recharge and be who they are. They may find spelling or reading difficult, but this does not mean they aren't brilliant at other things.'

Aysgarth School are not alone when it comes to building the bond between man's best friend and pupils (and adults too). Cundall Manor, for one, have two dogs in their boarding houses, but also have the 'Cundall Chickens', who are ably looked after by their carefully

selected chicken monitors, which help teach their pupils a lot about some of the school's key values like responsibility and looking after each other.

Rossall School, in Fleetwood, certainly makes use of its 170 acres of beautiful grounds, with many resident families having their own dogs and cats on site. Fiona Quartermain, head of learning development, often brings her dogs into the department. Whilst Dougal (a cross between a newfoundland and a standard poodle) is a little clumsy, Poppy (a cross between a spaniel and a poodle) is almost always to be found curled up



Left: A pupil with one of Rossall School's giant Flemish rabbits

