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School dog

Dear Parents and Carers,

We are excited to introduce you to a new member of Ludlow Primary School.

Woody is a five-month-old golden retriever who is in training to become a school dog and is set to become an integral part of our school community.

He has completed a course of puppy socialisation classes and is presently attending the level one behaviour training course. Woody has already visited the school in the summer term and met some of the children as part of his assessment process, so you might have already heard about him!

When deciding on a suitable dog to have in school, we have chosen to have a golden retriever for the following reasons:

- The breed is known to be child-friendly, lively, gentle mannered and affectionate, yet sensitive.
- The breed is known to be intelligent and respond excellently to training.

We have also undertaken a thorough risk assessment, which details the hygiene practices that will be in place – such as cleaning of hands and the environment before and after meeting Woody.

What are the benefits of having a school dog?

Numerous research studies have shown the benefits of therapy dogs in schools. Therapy dogs have been working in schools for the past 5 years across the UK. However, they have been commonplace in schools in the USA and Australia for many years.

Evidence indicates that benefits include:

- 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 furry friend 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.

Some concerns you might have

My child is allergic to dogs

It is understandable that some of you may be concerned about possible allergic reactions to a school dog. However, Woody will be subjected to the most thorough cleanliness and grooming regime. He will also only be allowed in situations with pupils who voluntarily wish to work with her. Your permission will of course be sought in advance of Woody having access to, and working with, your child in school.

Will Woody be properly cared for?

Woody will be extremely well looked after. He will live with Mrs Mather and her two other dogs; he will come to school most days but will stay safely in the offices until satisfactory training has been completed. He will then, in time, listen to pupils read in a controlled setting and will always be accompanied by a trained adult. He will undergo thorough and rigorous training, so will be extremely well-behaved. In the next couple of weeks, Woody will have an assessment in school by a fully qualified dog behaviourist to ensure he is suitable to be a school dog. Whilst Woody is in school, he will have access to a bed and a quiet space in Mrs Mather's office, where he can relax during the day. This is where he will spend most of his time initially. Woody will visit the vet regularly for all his injections as well as regular check-ups. If Woody is unwell for any reason, he will stay at home with Mrs Mather's other dogs.

My child fears dogs

Some children may have had upsetting experiences and thus have a fear of dogs (or another animal). Woody will only be in contact with children whose parents have given their permission. However, Woody's training will help him to be calm and gentle around children; He is already showing signs of a very loving and gentle nature. Experience and research have shown that, with proper guidance and handling, children can learn to overcome their fear of animals and grow in respect and appreciation for them.

We hope you will join us in welcoming Woody to the Ludlow Primary School family and embrace all that he has to offer the school. A letter to seek your permission regarding contact with Woody will be sent home at the appropriate time before contact with Woody occurs in a reading or therapy setting.

If you have any worries or concerns about Woody then please do not hesitate to contact us,

Best wishes,

Kate Mather
Headteacher