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**Does having a school-based wellbeing dog influence children's socio-emotional development and learning? A thematic analysis of parent perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study explores the influence of having a ‘newly acquired’ school-based wellbeing dog on children’s socio-emotional development and learning, as reported by seven parents of children at a participating school. Results revealed three superordinate themes: *Social Communication*; *Management of Emotions*; and *Attendance and Engagement*. Parents held positive views towards the newly acquired wellbeing dog, especially regarding its role in their child’s socioemotional development as well as their school engagement. The findings add to sparse literature, advocating for a wider distribution of wellbeing dogs in mainstream schools to support the mental health and wellbeing of children.

**Keywords:** School; Wellbeing dogs; Socioemotional development; Attendance; Engagement; Thematic Analysis

## Introduction

The rates of mental health conditions and emotional disorders in young children are rapidly increasing in the UK (NHS, 2021). This is exacerbated by well-documented difficulties in accessing adequate support and treatment e.g., through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) (see Anderson et al., 2017). To mitigate this, some UK schools are beginning to consider the use of a ‘wellbeing dog’ (also referred to as ‘therapy dog’ or ‘comfort dog’); that is, a school-based dog that is trained to provide affection, comfort, and support to promote positive outcomes for young children at that school.

The available literature yields largely positive effects of wellbeing dogs. Indeed, Baird et al. (2022) found in their recent systematic review that wellbeing dogs (mostly) had a positive influence on students’ moods and emotionality, as well as their social and communication skills, confidence, and their relationship with teachers. However, the reviewed articles comprised only students and teachers and failed to gauge the perspectives of parents. In one notable exception, Fynn and Runacres (2022) found the use of wellbeing dogs for behavioural use cases were less acceptable than those for reading and social use cases when utilising a parent sample. Parents of children with high anxiety also had higher acceptability scores than parents of children with low anxiety, indicating that parents’ acceptance of canine-assisted activities in schools is mediated by their child’s anxiety score.

It is crucial for parents to be aware and accepting of their child’s educational options, especially those who belong to historically marginalised groups (such as those with special educational needs and disabilities, SEND), as they may need to advocate for their child’s needs if they are not being met in the classroom. In cases where it is impractical to obtain data on children, parents can also act as supplementary informants about their child’s school experiences (Ozenbaugh et al., 2022). Therefore, to fill the gap in the present study, we used a qualitative design to help uncover the influence of wellbeing dogs on children’s socio-

emotional development and learning, *through the eyes* of their parents. The aim was to gain in-depth insight into parents' first-hand experiences of the use of wellbeing dogs, to help understand whether they do indeed promote positive outcomes for young children at school.

The research question for this study was: "How do parents/guardians describe their experiences of having a wellbeing dog at school in relation to their child's socio-emotional development and learning?"

## **Method**

### **Design**

This study adopted a qualitative interpretative approach, as it was congruent with our focus on exploring in detail parent/guardian perspectives on the influence of wellbeing dogs on their child's socio-emotional development and learning (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Participants**

Seven parents/guardians (six mothers) were recruited via self-selective sampling from a single mainstream school in the UK. Their children ranged in age from five- to twelve-years-old (all identified as white British). Four of the children had a statement of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The selected school was purposively sampled, due to its known recent acquisition of a trained wellbeing dog at the start of the school year.

### **Procedure**

Information sheets and consent forms were distributed to parents/guardians via the participating school. Those who agreed to take part were then interviewed via Zoom. The interviews lasted 20-30 minutes and were audio-recorded. After the interviews took place, participants received a full debriefing.

### **Measures**

A semi-structured interview schedule, inspired by Leos et al. (2022) and adapted for the purposes of this study, was used. This comprised five demographic/background questions

followed by 12 open-ended questions to gauge parental/guardian perspectives. Participants were encouraged to elaborate upon their experiences using non-directive prompts, for example, ‘Can you tell me more about that?’, ‘How did that make you feel?’ etc.

### **Data Analysis**

The first step of the analysis was to transcribe the interviews verbatim. The data were then analysed following the six-stage process for Thematic Analysis described in Braun and Clarke (2006). An inductive approach was taken, with semantic coding adopted.

### **Analysis**

Thematic analysis revealed three superordinate themes: *Social Communication*; *Management of Emotions*; and *Attendance and Engagement*.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Theme 1: Social Communication**

The dog was widely mentioned as a catalyst for communication throughout the school during the interviews. Parents also mentioned how the calming effect or stress reduction provided by the dog was believed to assist children to form emotional connections with peers, teachers, and the dog itself. This was frequently due to the dog being viewed as providing unconditional affection and not passing judgement on the children. However, it was widely noticed that the low dog-to-child ratio hampered the full impact that the wellbeing dog might make.

#### **Theme 2: Management of Emotions**

The introduction of the wellbeing dog, according to parents, has controlled or regulated their child’s emotional experience throughout the school. Participants frequently conceptualised the dog as having a calming presence that allows children to breathe or relax. This was also evident among parents of children with SEND. The dog’s ability to modulate

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<sup>1</sup> As this is a student paper with restricted word limits, the authors provide only a concise overview of each master theme, however the datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

emotions amid outbursts/disruptive behaviours was valued. This was linked to the dog's inability to communicate verbally, as well as the children's positive interaction with the dog.

### **Theme 3: Attendance and Engagement**

The presence of the wellbeing dog facilitated increased engagement in class activities amongst the children. This development was visible not only in the classroom as a whole, but also with students individually. Furthermore, some parents thought that the calming effect of the wellbeing dog enhanced their child's confidence in their abilities, causing them to ask for help or answer more questions in class. Furthermore, the dog's influence on their child's motivation was valued amongst parents. Overall, parents reported that their children did not have attendance issues, but that their child's motivation to come to school increased as they saw time spent with the dog as a reward. Parents attributed the improvement to the dog's abilities to alleviate stress, improve concentration, and boost confidence.

### **Discussion**

In line with Baird et al. (2022), the dog's ability to regulate emotions appeared connected to improved engagement and social communication. Notably, the dog served as a nonjudgmental presence, allowing the child to breathe or relax when experiencing stress in the classroom. Parents had a very positive perception of the influence of wellbeing dogs on their child's general and socioemotional wellbeing, as well as academically. These findings thus expand on a substantial body of studies, such as Ozenbaugh et al. (2022), which investigated the possible benefit of wellbeing dogs in schools by demonstrating how parents perceive the influence of role, but also emphasise how parents serve as advocates for their children i.e., highlighting the lack of dogs within schools, advocating for more dogs for a greater impact.

Future research or policies may want to consider using more wellbeing dogs within schools, or listen to how parents would ideally like to see the wellbeing dog work with the

children, i.e., read with them, or become more involved in their academic careers.

Implementing this allows further opportunities to promote socio-emotional development and learning, in an effort to reduce the rising numbers of social and emotional difficulties they are facing. Such work might also draw on a larger sample of parent participants comprising fathers as well as mothers, recognising the gender imbalance within the present sample.

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