



Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed, Thurles



SCHOOL DOG POLICY

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This Therapy Dog policy was prepared by the Student Support Team on behalf of, and in consultation with, the Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed. Staff, Students, Parents and Board of Management.

School Background Name and address of school: Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed., Thurles

Description of School: Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed. is a co-educational multi-denominal school under the management of Tipperary ETB.

Mission Statement of School: At Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed. we aspire to develop a caring and inclusive learning community that optimises the potential of each person. This policy is aligned to our core values of care, community, respect, equality and excellence in education.

Our Vision

The Student Support Team aims to lead the school community in the creation of an environment where Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed. students want to come to school because they feel safe, connected, supported and cared for. We hope to foster a school environment whereby each student and staff member knows that they feel valued.

This policy was formulated in consultation with staff, parents, students and the Board of Management of our school with the support of Autism Dogs Ireland.

Related School Policies

This School Dog Policy is consistent with and supported by a range of other School Policies:

- Code of Behaviour
- Wellbeing Policy
- Student Support Team Policy
- SPHE Policy

Rationale and Benefits 🐾

The introduction of a therapy dog at Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed, Thurles is supported by a growing body of research demonstrating the positive impact of animal-assisted therapy in school environments. A school dog can act as an additional resource for the school community, providing comfort and support. Key benefits include:

- **Emotional Well-being:** A dog can help reduce anxiety, increase self-confidence, and improve the emotional regulation of students and staff.
- **Academic Support:** The presence of a dog can boost students' motivation and confidence, particularly in reading and classroom engagement.
- **Behavioral Improvement:** Interacting with a dog can teach empathy, responsibility, and nurturing skills, which can lead to a decrease in aggressive or violent behavior.

- **School Community:** A dog can create a more positive, caring, and less intimidating atmosphere, fostering better relationships between students as well as between students and teachers.
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Key Principles 🐾

The presence of the school dog is contingent on the following principles, which will ensure the safety and well-being of all members of the school community and the dog itself:

- **Risk Assessment:** A comprehensive risk assessment has been conducted and will be reviewed annually to ensure the safety of students, staff, and visitors. The dog will be included in the school's fire evacuation procedures.
 - **Exclusivity:** Only the designated school therapy dog is permitted on the school premises. No other dogs are allowed without the prior permission of the Principal.
 - **Designated Space:** The dog will have a designated "chill-out zone" or quiet area where it can rest and retreat from interactions. This space is essential for the dog's welfare and will be respected by all.
 - **Health and Welfare:** The dog's welfare is of primary concern. It will not be brought to school if it is unwell. The handler is responsible for ensuring the dog is well-fed, hydrated, and given appropriate rest breaks. The dog will be weighed every month and the weight will be returned to Autism Assistance Dogs Ireland.
 - **Insurance:** The dog is covered by the school's Public Liability Insurance Policy and also has pet insurance to cover any unexpected medical costs.
 - **Transparency:** All staff, parents, and students will be informed about the presence of the school dog. Parents who do not want their child to interact with the dog may inform the Principal, Deputy Principals, or Year Heads of their wishes.
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Roles and Responsibilities 🐾

- **Lead Handler:** A designated staff member will act as the lead handler for the school dog. This person will be responsible for the dog's training, well-being, and overall management. They will know the dog's whereabouts at all times and will ensure it is supervised by trained staff members. It is the prerogative of the lead handler to designate an appropriate substitute handler in their absence.

- **Student Responsibilities:** Students will be educated on how to appropriately interact with the dog. This includes:
 - Washing hands before and after handling the dog
 - Not disturbing the dog while it is eating or sleeping
 - Not feeding the dog
 - Approaching the dog only when it is calm and seated
 - Never playing roughly with the dog
 - Never striking the dog

- **Code of Conduct:** The dog will not be allowed to roam freely during mealtimes or in food preparation areas. The dog is a "working dog," and all members of the school community will be reminded not to distract it while it is supporting students or in training.

Who is our Therapy Dog and who is the lead handler? 🐾

Our Therapy Dog is called Chacha. His lead handler is Ms Annmarie Bergin. There is a team of handlers who work with our Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed. Therapy Dog, under the direction of Ms Bergin.

Preparations for having our Therapy Dog 🐾

School leaders have taken advice from Autism Assistance Dogs Ireland, who provide training and guidance about the necessary risk assessments and insurance which must be in place, as well as practical guidance. Ms Annmarie Bergin, as lead handler, undertakes for Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed training to ensure the school is competent in handling the therapy dog. Ms Bergin and Mr Brennan, on behalf of the school, received training and guidance in dog behaviour enabling understanding of the dog's temperament and decimated this information to other handlers and the staff in general.

Training has ensured:

- 12 members of staff have been trained in handling Chacha.

- A designated chill-out zone is in place for our therapy dog

- Handlers remove the Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed. therapy dog to its designated chill-out zone if the therapy dog shows any signs of stress during interactions.

- A toilet area is designated within the school's grounds away from the students' play areas. This is on grass areas. Any dog litter is bagged up by the handler and disposed of appropriately.

- Parents/Guardians have been informed that a therapy dog is a member of our school community.
- Parents/Guardians who do not want their student to interact with the dog have been asked to inform the school.
- If a student has a phobia of dogs the lead handler may offer opportunities for the child to be slowly introduced to the Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed. therapy dog, to reduce their fear. This will only be done with the express permission of the student and their parents/guardians.
- A picture of the school therapy dog is placed prominently in the school reception to inform everyone that there is school therapy dog working in the school.

Under the picture it states: Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed. therapy dog “Chacha” together with Ms Annmarie Bergin (lead handler).

Appendix 1

Put the commands in here.

Important Information about school assistance dog Chacha

Chacha is here to help, and we can all make his job easier by following these simple steps:

 Here are the main commands Chacha understands. Please use the exact words and gestures so he doesn't get confused.

Basic Commands

Sit – Chacha sits.

Stand – Chacha stands.

Sit/Wait – With hand gesture for wait.

Down / Stay – Chacha lies down and stays (same hand gesture).

Walking Commands

Steady – Slow down walking pace.

Straight on / Let's go – Encourage Chacha to walk with you.

Travel

Hup Hup – Jump up (e.g., into the car).

Recall & Direction

Come – Recall command.

Touch – Nose touches your flat hand (used for comfort or redirection).

 Toilet

Busy Busy – Cue to go to the toilet.

 Boundaries

Off – For jumping up on people or counters.

Leave it – For food/toy refusal.

No – Clear stop command.

 Praise

Good boy – Positive reinforcement and praise.

Ask First

Always say: “May I pet Chacha?”

Wait until his handler says “Yes” before touching him.

 Stay Calm and Quiet

No shouting, running, or loud noises near Chacha.

He is working and needs peace to support his person.

 Hands at Your Sides

Keep your hands low and move slowly when near Chacha.

No high fives, sudden pats, or waving hands – they might startle him.

 No Food or Treats

Please do not feed Chacha.

He is on a special diet and must stay focused on his job.

 Be Gentle and Respectful

Treat Chacha like a friend. Be kind, caring, and considerate whenever you are around him.