

Media Release

14 April 2020

Therapy dogs lead the way to learning for vulnerable children

Our four legged friends have been a great source of comfort to those of us confined to home over the last few weeks, but for many vulnerable children, therapy dogs can provide a year round lifeline connecting them to learning and supporting them to recover from trauma.

MacKillop Family Services' (MacKillop) Paw Pals program uses therapy dogs to help vulnerable children who are currently disengaged, or at risk of disengaging, from education to manage their emotions and behaviour, improve their confidence and reconnect with their education.

For some children, school isn't an easy place to be. Many find it hard because beyond the school gates they're dealing with some tough issues: family violence, neglect, living out of home or social and emotional challenges. The longer the COVID-19 crisis continues, the more likely it is that students on the brink will disengage with education. We cannot wait until school returns to creatively engage these students in their learning.

Paw Pals is 100% community funded and to raise funds for the program, a special matched giving day, **Paws4Kids**, will take place on **Wednesday 22 April**. Every donation received before midnight that day will be tripled by a group of generous partners with the goal of reaching \$300,000 to fund the program.

Anne Henderson, Executive Principal, MacKillop Education says the impact of Paw Pals has far surpassed expectations of this innovative program.

"Watching a child who couldn't bring himself to come inside the school building on his first day, progress to one on one learning with a support worker as long as his furry friend Indie the therapy dog, was there, has been inspirational. Through working with Indie, that six -year-old gained the confidence to join other students in the classroom and now he happily takes part in all class activities with his classmates.

"It's a relatively new program and we are so grateful to the community for the funding support that helped change the lives of many children and their families. In the past year, the Paw Pals program has been the only way we could connect with some children who had previously resisted all other attempts to engage them in education," Anne added.

To help students unable to attend school due to the current isolation guidelines, the Paw Pals team is sending individualised learning packs to carers for existing students and calling by video at their usual appointment time so that they can still connect with the dogs, and remain engaged in their education.

"Our Paw Pals therapy dogs are so busy they can hardly keep up with demand, and with the increased challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, vulnerable young people will struggle even more to stay engaged with education. Therapy dogs provide a unique type of companionship, as well as mental and emotional support, and in these times of isolation and social distancing, our young people are leaning on their canine buddies more than ever," said Anne Henderson.

Paws4Kids ambassador and Channel Ten *Pooches at Play* Host Lara Shannon, has worked with dogs all her life and has seen firsthand the role dogs can play in helping people cope with the world around them.

"This program is providing those that need it most the chance to re-engage with school and complete their education, which is something many people take for granted. Donating to this initiative helps those that may feel the world has forgotten about them know that people do care," Lara said.

Donations to Paws4Kids on **Wednesday 22 April** are being multiplied by partners: Parade College, SmartGroup Foundation, PETstock Assist, Give52 and the Paw Pals matching circle to reach a goal of \$300,000.

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Notes to Editors:

- Paws4Kids takes place on Wednesday 22 April, 2020.
- On this matched Giving Day, donations from the public will have 3 x the impact as the amount donated will be multiplied three times by matched givers.
- Donations to Paws4Kids are being matched by Parade College, SmartGroup Foundation, PETstock Assist, Give52 and a PawPrints matching circle to reach a goal of \$300,000.
- The Paw Pals program is 100% community funded.
- Paws Pals is continuing to support vulnerable children throughout the COVID-19 crisis with individualised learning packs and video calls with the therapy dogs.
- Find out more about the Paw Pals program and how to donate to Paws4Kids at paws4kids.org.au
- [MacKillop Family Services](http://mackillop.org.au) operates in Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia and has been committed to working with families and communities so children can thrive since 1997.