

# Media Release

27 April 2021

## **Paws4Kids to the rescue – supporting vulnerable children stay connected to learning**

Vanessa would sit in the car outside her school and refuse to go in. Her grandmother, Lee, who drove her to school, knew Vanessa struggled with anxiety and that sometimes it was just too difficult for her to face classmates, teachers, or schoolwork. Often, she would sit out the front for hours, too anxious to walk through the front doors.

The day that Vanessa met Ivey the therapy dog, everything changed. Within a few weeks, Vanessa was eagerly jumping out of the car to go to school to meet with Ivey and an education outreach worker.

MacKillop Family Services' Paw Pals program uses therapy dogs to help vulnerable children who have stopped going to school or are at risk of disengaging from education to manage their emotions and behaviour, improve their confidence and reconnect with their education. Many of these children struggle because they are dealing with tough issues beyond the school gates: family violence, neglect, living out of home, disability, or social and emotional challenges.

Paw Pals has been operating for three years and has had such a positive impact on the lives of the children and young people it works with, that demand for the program far exceeds its capacity.

To support the program to continue and grow, [Paws4Kids](#), a matched giving fundraising day, will take place on **Wednesday 28 April**. Every dollar donated to Paws4Kids will be automatically tripled by generous matching partners, with the aim of raising \$250,000 for Paw Pals.

Paw Pals Coordinator, Sarah Castle, sees how working with therapy dogs has turned around the lives of children who were struggling to engage in learning.

"I wish everyone could see what a difference working with our therapy dogs makes to these children's lives and to their families. If you have a child who is distressed by the idea of school and education, it is enormous pressure on the whole family. Our dogs support children on a completely different level, there is no weight, heaviness or expectation – dogs can make a breakthrough with a child when we have exhausted all other means to connect.

"We get calls from schools, parents and foster carers all the time about children and young people who need the unique type of companionship, mental and emotional support that therapy dogs provide. We know working with the dogs can transform lives and we want to help as many children as we can. Paws4Kids has enabled the program to get off the ground and become a success, we now need to grow so we can get that support to as many children as possible," added Sarah.

Paws4Kids ambassador and television 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.

"So many of us have been grateful for the company of our furry friends over this past year but for children who don't find it easy to go to school or to connect with their education, the calming presence of a therapy dog can make all the difference.

“Reaching the Paws4Kids fundraising target will enable MacKillop to help more kids who’ve experienced abuse, neglect, or other childhood trauma to heal and learn again,” said Lara.

Vanessa’s grandmother Lee is amazed at the change in her since she started with the Paw Pals program.

“When the dog is brought over to the car, Vanessa takes one look at that wagging tail, takes the lead and off she goes into school without a backward glance. She is more confident, and she is making friends and interacting better with the other kids at school.

“This program gives children a chance to learn and heal. We feel so lucky that Vanessa has benefited from Paw Pals and want to see the program help other kids who need help to deal with the issues that affect their lives.”

To find out more about Paws4Kids, visit [www.paws4kids.org.au](http://www.paws4kids.org.au)

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**Notes to Editors:**

- Paws4Kids takes place on **Wednesday 28 April 2021**.
- 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, to raise \$250,000.
- Donations are tripled by matching partners: PETstock Assist (Major Partner), Queensland Community Foundation’s Gordon Home for Boys and Girls Inc. Trust Fund, Bob Stewart of Kew, AMC Commercial Cleaning, Tee-up for Kids Foundation, Give52, and our PawPrints Matching Circle - including Greg Noonan, Angela Rutherford and Daniel O’Connor.
- Find out more about the Paw Pals program and how to donate to Paws4Kids at [paws4kids.org.au](http://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.