

## MEDIA RELEASE

**MacKillop Paw Pals program gives young people a learning lifeline**  
*Help raise \$360K for Paw Pals Appeal annual matched giving day on April 30*  
*All donations will be tripled by generous matching partners!*

An innovative, community-funded program run by [MacKillop Family Services](#) is helping children in Victoria re-engage with education in a remarkable way.

Students with learning differences or special needs often struggle to engage with peers, concentrate on studies and learn effectively due to a host of classroom challenges. Social and emotional difficulties that kids face outside the school gates also hamper their progress at school.

“With the number of Victorian students with learning difficulties steadily rising over the past decade<sup>1</sup>, it is more important than ever to give kids a learning lifeline,” said Brona Walshe, MacKillop’s Education and Engagement Programs Director.

[MacKillop Family Services’ Paw Pals program](#) uses Animal Assisted Education to connect with young people who find it difficult to attend school due to issues such as anxiety or learning difficulties, which make it really challenging for them to be in a classroom.

“Paw Pals facilitators work with therapy dogs to help vulnerable children who are disengaged from education to manage their emotions and behaviour, improve their confidence and reconnect with learning,” said Walshe.

“They provide a level of support that simply isn’t available in schools, helping children who struggle to control their emotions by teaching them how to respond to and command the dog. Once calm, the children engage in learning activities with the dog.”

Since its launch in 2018 with one dog and a facilitator, Paw Pals has supported more than 800 kids to get back to education! Today the program has 14 facilitators and more than 20 rotating dogs working across Melbourne, Geelong and Ballarat.

Besides [school settings](#), Paw Pals therapy dogs also support vulnerable young individuals residing in [MacKillop’s residential care homes](#), where they receive support to heal from past trauma and prepare for transition into adulthood.



**Case study:** *Struggling with school refusal, 12yo Harrison finds solace and a reason to learn from Paw Pals’ therapy dog, Indie. [READ ABOUT HARRISON & INDIE’S REMARKABLE CONNECTION THAT SHOWS ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE!](#)*

## Transforming lives with helping paws

In fact, the program's inception unfolded in one of the homes with the introduction of Millie the Labrador and a 15-year-old girl named Claire\*. Claire had autism and suffered from a deep childhood trauma that put herself at significant risk in the community. She spent most of her time closed in her room and was disconnected from staff and anyone around her.

After months of struggling to engage with the young girl, Walshe and program co-founder Sarah Castle decided to try a new approach – what would happen if they brought in a dog? The results surpassed their wildest expectations!



*Mural of Millie, MacKillop Family Services' first Paw Pals therapy dog, featured at MacKillop Education School in Maidstone VIC*

“The bond between Claire and Millie was instantaneous and profound,” said Walshe. “Interacting with Millie helped Claire discover more about herself and how people learn and communicate. She became engaged with learning as she used positive reinforcement methods to teach Millie the skills she needed to become a certified therapy dog.”

One day during a stroll with Millie, Claire said to Castle that nobody noticed her when she walked down the street, but everything changed when she walked alongside Millie. Suddenly, people were making eye contact, acknowledging her presence. Perplexed, Claire asked why that was. Castle responded, ‘Because you’re the one meeting their gaze’.

“With Millie’s help, Claire went from feeling invisible to being visible!” said Walshe. “Millie has since passed away, but her spirit lives on in the Paw Pals program.”

## Future of Paw Pals is in community hands

The demand for Paw Pals has grown particularly after the prolonged COVID lockdowns which heavily impacted young people’s mental health<sup>2</sup>.

“Today, the cohort has grown significantly from kids removed from their families and not attending school to those who come from stable family relationships, suffer from generalised anxiety and do not have learning support services available to them, especially in regional areas,” said Walshe.

“The Paw Pals program has shown to make a significant difference in the lives of children who require additional social, emotional and learning support. We are looking forward to launching the program in NSW later this year!”

MacKillop’s Paw Pals program is funded by the community, driven by an annual matched giving day appeal on **Tuesday, 30 April**.

This year, the Paw Pals Appeal aims to raise \$360,000 and all donations made on or before 30 April will be tripled by generous matching partners: CCI Giving, Catholic Development Fund, iCare Staffing, Queensland Gives, the Paw Prints Matching Circle and **Major Partner Petstock Foundation**.

“Community support and donations help us to empower one more child with education and ignite a lifetime of opportunity,” said Walshe.

**Find out more on how to donate at [pawpalsappeal.org.au](http://pawpalsappeal.org.au)**

\* Claire’s name has been changed due to privacy.

## MEDIA CONTACTS

Angela Mallon, Media and Communications Lead, MacKillop Family Services  
438 076 313 | [Angela.Mallon@mackillop.org.au](mailto:Angela.Mallon@mackillop.org.au)

Caroline Zambrano, PetJourno | 0403 550 730 | [petjourno@gmail.com](mailto:petjourno@gmail.com)

PHOTOS – [LINK](#)

## CASE STUDY -

Harrison & Paw Pals therapy dog Indie – a remarkable connection that shows anything is possible! [READ STORY HERE](#)

## AVAILABLE FOR INTERVIEW

- Brona Walshe, Director, MacKillop Education and Engagement Programs
- Sarah Castle, MacKillop Family Services, Paw Pals Coordinator & Facilitator
- Abigail Hart, Education Support Worker, MacKillop Education School in Maidstone VIC
- Lara Shannon, Paw Pals Ambassador & leading Australian dog expert, creator and host of Channel 10's Pooches at Play and 7TWO's Animal SOS Australia

*"Dogs possess a remarkable ability to help young people to navigate their emotions and challenges. Their genuine affection and ability to intuitively understand human emotions make it effortless for dogs to connect with people and inspire greater resilience and positivity."*  
**Lara Shannon, Paw Pals Ambassador**

## Notes to Editors:

- The number of Victorian students with a disability has been steadily rising over the past decade. Source: [Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority](#).
  - In Victoria, more than a quarter of students (26.3%) received an educational adjustment in 2023. It compares with 24.7% in 2022 and 17.1% in 2015. Of the students who received an adjustment in 2023, 12.7% was for cognitive disability and 9.3% for social emotional.
  - There are 272,463 students with disability in Victoria in 2023. Note: students with quality differentiated teaching practices (QDTP) do not receive a (financial) education adjustment, which is 8.7% of students in Victoria.
- 20,000 additional young Victorians were registered with learning difficulties, including ADHD or depression, during the six COVID lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. The 23% jump was the biggest spike in the nation. Source: [VIC Nationals' press release](#).

## About MacKillop Family Services

MacKillop Family Services operates in VIC, NSW, WA, ACT and the NT and has been committed to working with families and communities so children can thrive since 1997. Find out more about MacKillop Family Services at [www.mackillop.org.au](http://www.mackillop.org.au)