

# Media Release

20 April 2026

## Paw Pals Appeal helps struggling children find a safe path back to learning

For some children, school isn't a place of curiosity and growth, it can be a source of fear and anxiety. **This April**, a [community appeal](#) is seeking support for Paw Pals, an animal assisted learning and wellbeing program where therapy dogs help vulnerable children rediscover confidence, connection and a readiness to learn.

Delivered by MacKillop Family Services, Paw Pals supports children who have experienced distress, disrupted schooling, anxiety or behavioural challenges that make traditional school environments overwhelming. Many children referred to the program have faced repeated exclusion or prolonged disengagement from education.

### Therapy dogs support emotional safety

Paw Pals takes a different approach to education. Rather than focusing first on academic outcomes, the program prioritises emotional safety, trust and wellbeing. Through structured sessions led by specialist educators and trained therapy dogs, **Paw Pals has supported more than 1700 children** in Victoria to regulate their emotions, build relationships and experience learning in a calm, supportive setting.

"A classroom can feel unsafe or simply too overwhelming for some children," said **Brona Walsh, MacKillop Family Services**. "Paw Pals meets children where they are. The presence of a therapy dog helps lower anxiety and build trust, creating the emotional safety children need before learning can begin."

The program helps children develop emotional regulation, social skills, communication and school readiness. Educators report improved attendance, greater willingness to engage in learning tasks, and stronger relationships between children and staff.

Paw Pals has shown particular impact for children with complex needs who might otherwise spend long periods disengaged from education, increasing the risk of isolation, disadvantage and poor long-term outcomes.

### Community support to grow Paw Pals

Despite growing demand, Paw Pals relies on community support to continue and expand its work. Funds raised through the appeal during **the month of April**, will directly support trained therapy dog teams, specialist staff and program delivery, ensuring more children can access this life changing support when they need it most. **A special boost round from Monday 20 – Friday 24 April will see** donation up to \$30,000 to the Paw Pals appeal doubled thanks to our supporting partners including **iCare Staffing, Catholic Development Fund**.

"With the right support, every child can learn," Brona said. "Community support for Paw Pals means children who are struggling aren't left behind, they're given the chance to thrive."

Members of the community are encouraged to donate or learn more about Paw Pals by visiting [Paw Pals Appeal | Help a Child Reconnect with Learning](#)

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