

BIALIK COLLEGE STUDENTS ARE LEARNING WITH DOGS IN AN EDUCATION FIRST

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W.C. Fields famously said, "Never work with animals or children", but Bialik College has been successfully doing both.

In an Australian education first, Bialik introduced the groundbreaking Dogs for Life program last year, in conjunction with the Centre for Service and Therapy Dogs Australia (CSTDA).

Students in Prep to Year 3 participate in the weekly program geared towards building social and emotional intelligence, as well as enhancing curriculum activities. The program has given them the opportunity to achieve amazing educational goals and improve their emotional wellbeing. Although therapy dogs have been used successfully in schools for children with special needs, this is the first time a program like this has been implemented in a mainstream school in Australia.

Kevin Picker, general manager of the CSTDA, says the dogs are a great way to teach students key concepts by showing rather than just telling. Students in the Early Learning Centre have used the dogs as a conduit through which to discuss difficult issues. Dogs have proven to be a great way to teach students verbal and non-verbal communication, rights and responsibilities and conflict resolution.

Learning how to be around dogs and respecting their personal space, directly relates to basic personal space of children and the start of the intimacy circles. The dogs also help enhance social and emotional development, with improvements in children's self-esteem, autonomy, and empathy for others. Looking at how to care for dogs, including nutrition, grooming, etc., allows children to then consider their own healthy eating and how they take care of themselves.

"Dogs are the best partner for human wellness," says Kevin. "They are also the easiest animals to work with in a therapy and educational setting. Dogs are non-judgemental – they help children reach a level of self-esteem that can't necessarily be reached in interactions with their peers."

Daphne Gaddie, Head of Bialik's Early Learning Centre (ELC), explains, "What's remarkable about this program is that it enables children to learn and understand concepts that are so important, but sometimes too complex, sensitive or uncomfortable for both teachers and students to tackle. Children have heard social values expressed with words over and over again, but don't always truly absorb the meaning unless it is through actions. Using dogs as the conduit for discussion allows for a much deeper and broader understanding."

The Dogs for Life program, in conjunction with all Bialik College's wellbeing strategies, brings a deep level of respect from the children to each other, adults and their environment. Already running successfully overseas, the program is headed by Yariv Ben-Yosef, who was previously a tiger trainer in Israel and has worked internationally to develop unique and innovative techniques to train service and therapy dogs. The Dogs for Life program has now been running at Bialik College for just over 12 months with teachers reporting fantastic results and the program attracting educational interest nationally.