A touch of animal magic
Supporting engagement and positive attachments was the thinking behind Priestnall School’s series of dog-training sessions, as Gareth Morewood explains.

Outcomes
Participants not only demonstrated an increased interest and enthusiasm in the dogs and the subject, but also developed better listening skills and abilities to communicate with others. The dogs themselves, at the end of the course, also showed better concentration, social skills and improved obedience which, of course, is credit to the pupils and parents and carers taking part.

Therapeutic aspect
While delivering the eight sessions we were supported by a psychologist and psychotherapist. Their reflections on the therapeutic aspect of the Dog Training and Animal Assisted Psychotherapy programme were essential to our wider aims of supporting mental health in a proactive manner. This programme incorporated the use of dog-training techniques, pet care information, canine interaction and experiential therapy. The children experienced interactive emotional control and learned how their emotional states and behaviour affected the behaviour of the dog. Some children had to change dog partners because their behaviour/ emotional state did not match the particular animal. This, again, provided a unique learning experience for all involved.

The young people learned how to direct the dog and to take control of their situations through assertiveness and self-focus. Initially, all the children were led by the dogs and felt unable to control the situation, but over the space of five weeks the children all made remarkable progress in assertive leadership of their animal partner. The increase in confidence in the pupils and their canine partners was amazing, and transferred into both school and home life, with the children showing greater self-assurance and a developed sense of being able to communicate appropriately and effectively.

The children experienced reciprocal bonding and affection with their dog through handling, grooming, health care and fun, in addition to developing deeper attachment and more secure bonds with their parents and carers.

WHAT IS ATTACHMENT?
- Attachment is an affectionate bond between two individuals that endures through space and time and serves to join them emotionally.
- Attachment experiences are fundamental to emotional, social, physical and cognitive development.
- Good early attachments serve to promote resilience to later traumatic (life) experiences.
- The foundation of attachment is the early main care/child interaction.
- Attachment refers to the interaction between a parent and child when the parent:
  - is available to the child
  - is able to understand their needs
  - responds appropriately to meet needs
  - communicates that the child is valued, understood, is able to affect change and is safe.

Characteristics of negative attachment
- Inability to regulate emotions (rage, panic, depression, impulsive).
- Basic mistrust (if someone is nice, it must be a trick).
- Low self-esteem/high shame (I am bad, I deserve to be hurt).
- Need for control (I need to take care of myself, I don’t trust/understand others).
- Learning difficulties (poor concentration and self-belief, disassociation).

Repetuned for transition
Many consider this programme to be a real luxury. However, the outcomes directly related to the sessions for individual students, their dogs and the parents and carers have been immense. At relatively low cost – £100 per session – eight young people and their parents and carers enjoyed outstanding outcomes. We were also able to replicate the sessions as part of transition events for Year 6 students to provide a really unique start to their time at secondary school. Ultimately, given the increased focus on mental health since September 2014, unique events like this help to reduce associated risks to mental health and ensure that vulnerable young people have a chance to be more included.

The delivery of the sessions was made possible due to the following support by:
- Damian Riley, dog behaviourist and trainer
- Dr Margaret Bullock, psychologist
- Julie Stripp, psychotherapist.

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