

Media Release



21 April 2022

‘Pawsitive’ support for kids who struggle with learning

For close to a year, 11-year-old Amber was unable to go to school; she could not even walk through the school gates. Everything Amber’s mum, Peta, and her teachers tried to engage her in her learning failed until Peta heard about an innovative education therapy dog program that works with children to manage their emotions and behaviour, improve their confidence and reconnect them with their education.

Amber has an autism diagnosis and lives with a sensory processing disorder which means that a typical school environment caused her sensory overload and triggered severe anxiety. After a short time working with MacKillop Family Services’ Paw Pals program, Amber was able to go back into the classroom when she was accompanied by one of the therapy dogs.

MacKillop Family Services’ Paw Pals program has been operating for four years and has had such a positive impact on the lives of the children and young people it works with, that demand for assistance from therapy dogs far exceeds the capacity of the program.

“Paw Pals has been a complete lifeline for Amber,” Peta says. “The magic happens because the facilitators and therapy dogs accompany Amber into the classroom. She is supported in the moment to manage the things that are the most difficult for her – that’s what makes such a difference. Amber feels supported by her safety plan to help her remain calm and regulate her emotions while the Paw Pals facilitators engage her in learning activities involving the therapy dog.

“Amber is a happy child now and this is the first program that has truly engaged her,” added Peta.

With the support of the community, MacKillop has been able to grow the Paw Pals program across Melbourne and introduce it to Geelong. This year, MacKillop is running [Paws4Kids](#) on **Thursday 28 April**, a campaign which will see every dollar donated automatically tripled thanks to generous supporters like PETstock Assist, PETstock’s charity foundation, and other matching partners. The goal is to raise \$330,000, which will allow MacKillop to continue their Paw Pals program and expand it to Ballarat.

Coordinator of the Paw Pals program, Sarah Castle, has seen first-hand how Paw Pals has transformed the lives of kids who were previously disengaged with education.

“The program is reaching students in a way that teachers, on their own, cannot. It’s presenting a solution to the challenge of engaging kids who are struggling to learn in school, something that we’re seeing more and more, particularly as schools have transitioned from home-learning back into the classroom,” Sarah said.

Paws4Kids Ambassador Cass Dunn, who is a clinical and coaching psychologist, agrees that the program can support children who have struggled with disruptions to education over the last two years.

“It’s more important than ever before that we have programs like Paw Pals to support children to engage in education. We are only just beginning to understand the mental health toll that the last two years of disrupted schooling has had on all children but it has been even more detrimental to kids who were already struggling with issues that create a barrier to learning.

“Therapy dogs support children with social and emotional learning needs to develop self-regulation skills. A child who struggles with anxiety or trauma can find it easier to develop a bond with a therapy dog than with an adult. In working with the dog, they learn to regulate their emotions so they are better able to interact with their teachers and peers.

“The Paw Pals program has made a huge difference to kids who struggle to learn in a classroom, and it would be great to see the program expand to reach so many others who need additional support so they too can stay engaged with the learning,” Cass said.

Sarah adds: “We know that Paw Pals works and there are so many children who need the program, but we are unable to meet the demand. Funds raised through the Paws4Kids campaign will allow us to reach more of the young people who need this support to return to learning.”

Major partner, PETstock Assist, is putting its support behind the Paws4Kids Matched Giving Day and is calling on the community to donate to Paws4Kids on Thursday 28 April.

PETstock Assist’s Charity and Events Lead, Jessica Curtis, says that the charity organisation is proud to be supporting Paws4Kids once again to help even more vulnerable children connect with education and succeed at school through the use of therapy dogs.

“We’re encouraging all community members to make a donation on the Paws4Kids Matched Giving Day so that Paw Pals can extend its services to PETstock Assist’s hometown of Ballarat and continue its life-changing work supporting disadvantaged children.”

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Notes to Editors:

- [Paws4Kids](#) takes place on **Thursday 28 April 2022..**
- 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 \$330,000.
- For every \$50 donated, Paws4Kids will receive \$150 when donations are tripled by major partner PETstock Assist and matching partners Queensland Community Foundation, Catholic Development Fund Melbourne, Gaudry Foundation, Polished Man, Integrated Therapeutic Care, KLC Recruitment and our Pawprints Matching Circle, Angela Rutherford and Greg Noonan.
- Find out more about the Paw Pals program and how to donate to Paws4Kids at paws4kids.org.au
- [MacKillop Family Services](#) operates in Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia and the Northern Territory 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