

## Students get special attention from dogged helpers at school of love



**Class photo:** EdSpace student Jordan with support worker Jodie Feehan — and Brooke and Blue. Picture: TONY GOUGH

A BENALLA school is taking animals into the classroom to cut stress and broaden students' career options.

When Maggie Fanning, a nurse, and her husband, Benalla GP Dr David Rodgers, could not keep their autistic son Daniel in a mainstream classroom, they did the extraordinary — started their own school.

EdSpace is for children 10-18, most of whom are on the autism spectrum, and others who have a range of developmental or medical disorders.

In the past 18 months, therapy dogs have become a part of their days.

This month, EdSpace will open a shop where year 11 students will groom and train locals' dogs. The work will go towards achieving a Certificate II in Animal Studies and the students will make some money.

After Daniel's school decided it had done all it could for him by grade 5, Ms Fanning opened EdSpace at the old Benalla Hospital, later getting her Diploma of Education.

The school took a new path about 18 months ago when Daniel, now 16, got a therapy dog named Shadow.

### Shelley Hadfield

Shadow was trained by the Centre for Service and Therapy Dogs Australia, where Yariv Ben-Yosef is head trainer, to work with an autistic child.

Daniel had become increasingly reluctant to go into the street because of a fear of sudden loud noises.

But after Shadow started going to school

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JODIE FEEHAN

with him, he became more confident.

Mr Ben-Yosef was recruited to train EdSpace students in the Certificate II in Animal Studies last year. Since then, the children have trained a search-and-rescue dog named Celia and helped train another dog for a local child with severe disabilities.

Celia will be used in a therapy dog breeding program at the school, and students will train her puppies.

“It's amazing how it makes them feel better,” said support worker Jodie Feehan.