

Bialik College barking up the right tree

ADAM BLAU

BIALIK College is giving a whole new meaning to the phrase teacher's pet – although in this case the teacher is a pet.

In a first for mainstream Australian education, the school has introduced "Dogs for Life", an innovative program for students which helps foster notions such as trust, respect and empathy through interaction with man's best friend.

Run in conjunction with the Centre for Service and Therapy Dogs Australia (CSTDA), over recent weeks, sessions have been held for students from prep to year 3.

Having pioneered similar programs overseas, the initiative is run by Israeli Yariv Ben-Yosef.

A former tiger trainer, Ben-Yosef has developed unique methods to improve children's understanding and communication through their interaction with furry friends.

"Even though the intentions of the program are good, it needed the right people to drive it," a Bialik staff member commented, and Ben-Yosef has those qualities in spades.

Similar to his canine helpers, Ben-Yosef possesses infectious energy that commands the attention and affection of the Bialik youngsters, evident as he guided an excitable year 1 class through various activities, such as working with a ticker and building obstacle courses suitable for dogs of varying sizes.

Ben-Yosef explained that tackling new, often complicated ideas through dogs is easy and enjoyable for the children.

"We challenge the kids with lots of topics for the dogs, like cooperation and communication," Ben-Yosef said, after a vigorous session with a Bialik year 1 class.

Slowly, Ben-Yosef steers the sessions from children working with his dogs into demonstrating to students how these activities and concepts can extend to how they relate to their fellow classmates.

"This is what we aim for:



Yariv Ben-Yosef and furry friend Hope with year 1 Bialik students.

Photos: Peter Haskin

first, it's respect your dog, and from that we learn how to respect your friend," he said.

The enigmatic trainer has worked in Israel, Germany and the United States but declares the Australian students as the best fit for "Dogs for Life".

"Here is the best program and I tell you why," he said. "The culture, the support and the mentality from everyone here. Whatever I ask for they give me, and more.

"This is a unique two-year program that directly coincides with what the children are learning in normal classes."

Lynne Wilson
Bialik parent

"The children are taking so well to the program. I'm not finding this challenging; I'm finding it exciting!"

CSTDA's general manager, Kevin Picker, first experienced Ben-Yosef's work when the trainer brought a canine companion for Picker's autistic son, resulting in immediate improvements in his condition.

"I believe that dogs are the best partner for human wellness, not just for people with disabilities," Picker said.

"Dogs are non-judgmental; they help children reach a level of self-esteem that cannot necessarily be reached interacting with their peers."

Picker and Ben-Yosef have combined to bring the benefits of pet ownership into the educational system, using

dogs to demonstrate ideas and subtleties that can be difficult to convey in a classroom.

"Every week is a different concept," Picker told *The AJN*.

"We cover communication, empathy, violence, discrimination, personal space – the program is only limited by how far we're willing to take it.

"One week we bring in dogs from all over the world – of all different shapes and colours – and show how even if the dogs are different, with varying strengths and weaknesses, they can get still get along.

"In another session, we focus on empathy, encouraging non-violence by showing how a dog reacts to cruelty or aggressiveness – if you're not kind, the dog will run away. We then apply this back to children trying to make friends," Picker said.

Lynne Wilson, who has two children involved in the Bialik program and who also lends an active hand during the sessions, says one of the bigger perks of "Dogs for Life" is its intention to coexist with the educational system.

"It's not just a feel-good thing or a once-off," Wilson said. "This is a unique two-year program that directly coincides with what the children are learning in normal classes."

Head of Bialik's early learning centre, Daphne Gaddie, praised the initiative for its unprecedented ability to communicate complex and sensitive concepts to young students.

"Children have heard social values expressed with words over and over again but do not always absorb the meaning unless it's through actions," she said.

"Using dogs as the conduit for discussion allows for a much deeper and broader understanding."

For more information on the CSTDA, visit www.cstda.com.au.

Watch Yariv and the dogs in action
Available on the iPad app and e-paper edition



Ruby Held and Woody Weissman up close with black labrador Tassie.