

Research Report

*Outcomes and Experiences of the Sweet Charity Canine Ambassador Program (CAP) -  
Children and Youth Mental Health*

Submitted to:

Sweet Charity Medical Assistance Dogs  
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## **Executive Summary**

In June 2017, 38 students, teachers, staff and parents/guardians from three Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB) schools, who offered the Sweet Charity Canine Ambassador Program (CAP), voluntarily participated in a focus group to explore the outcomes and experiences of the CAP program that was offered in their school. In addition, researchers met with the school administrators and school staff (who trained as Sweet Charity Canine Ambassador handlers) to learn about their experiences of the Sweet Charity CAP program.

The data collected was used to address the following research and policy questions:

1. What are the essential components of the Sweet Charity program?
2. How does the Sweet Charity program impact participant experience?
3. How does the presence of Sweet Charity dogs impact the school and community climate?

From an analysis of the data collected from the 3 focus groups and 5 interviews, 4 overarching themes emerged from the qualitative data collected. To envision these themes, a rigorous framework for qualitative analysis was applied whereby the researcher analyzed the data through a familiarization of the data, identification of a thematic framework, indexing of the data, charting of themes and mapping and interpretation.

### **1. Positive Students Experience**

- Students liked the CAP program.
- The CAP program appeared to have a positive impact on individual students in unique ways at each of the schools that took part in the focus groups.
- The use of the CAP program impacted individuals in ways such as spending time with the dog as a reinforcement for pro-social behaviour and to teach and encourage self-regulation skills.
- Students expressed that the dogs were helpful in several ways, including creating a welcoming environment in their school and increasing student use of the services that the dogs supported, improving communication between students and staff, reducing student anxiety, mood and stress, reducing student problem behaviour, helping improve focus and ability to get work done.
- Students felt that the program helped to teach responsibility.

### **2. Positive Staff Experience**

- Staff liked the Sweet Charity CAP program.
- Staff reported that the CAP program advanced a welcoming and calm environment in their school.
- Improved communication between students and staff and staff with staff.

- Staff reported that the CAP program appeared to reduce student anxiety and stress, improve mood, and was used as a proactive tool to reduce student problem behaviour and interpersonal conflict.
- Staff reported that the CAP program helped improve focus and ability to get work done in class and at the library.

### **3. Engaged School Community**

- The program had a positive impact on the school community as a whole.
- Staff, students and parents reported that the CAP program was good for the school community.
- Staff expressed that the CAP dogs had a calming effect on the school.

### **4. CAP Handler/Dog Experience**

- CAP handlers liked the CAP program
- They reported that they felt supported by Sweet Charity and the professional training they offered.
- They felt that support from their administrators was instrumental to the program success.
- Challenges to the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog program were also identified, including student and staff dog allergies, student and staff dog fears, and dog hygiene.
- Staff also reported that they had to devote a considerable amount of time to complete the required program training and to ensure that their dog was cared for when at work with the staff.

Through an analysis of the data, it appears that the CAP program had a positive impact on students' experience, staff engagement and experience, and impacted the school community in a positive way. In addition the CAP program appears to have had a positive impact on child and youth mental health of those students who are involved in the program.

## Background

The purpose of this report is to explore the outcomes and experiences of the Sweet Charity Canine Ambassador Program (CAP) as this may relate to Children and Youth Mental Health. Sweet Charity exists to train dogs to help people who need them. The organization has three core programs. The Diabetes Alert Dog Program, the Diabetes Support Dog Program and the Canine Ambassador Program. This research is focused on the Canine Ambassador Program.

The Canine Ambassador Program (CAP) in the school setting is established when a school administrator is supportive of a school staff member who has a suitable pet dog and invites them to be vetted and trained by Sweet Charity to provide emotional support in the safety of the particular school. According to Sweet Charity, the ambassador teams promote positive socialization and calm interactions with a goal of promoting well-being and positive mental health.

Sweet Charity received an Ontario Trillium Foundation grant to seed the growth and development of their programs. Sweet Charity contracted with Georgian College's Centre for Applied Research (CARI) and researcher, Dr. Howard Bloom and a team of Child and Youth Care students, to learn about the experiences and outcomes of their program as it impacts children and youth mental health.

## Methodology

This applied research project involved three data collection activities:

1. A literature review and environmental scan of animal-assisted wellness interventions appropriate for use in community, secondary and elementary schools. A bibliography of this literature, with brief annotations, is included at the end of this report (Appendix 1). Overall, the reviewed literature suggests efficacy in a variety of animal assisted therapeutic interventions to address mental health and wellness, and that human-animal therapeutic interventions are appropriate in a variety of milieu.
2. Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders were conducted by Dr. Howard Bloom who met, at the end of the program, with the administrator and CAP dog handler at each focus group school. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.
3. Focus groups with additional volunteer stakeholders were conducted by Dr. Howard Bloom at the end of the program. Participants included staff, teachers, administrators, students, and parents/guardians of students in the school. These focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. In addition, the focus group discussions were captured using an infographic collage process. An infographic is a visual display of information that is presented in a way that communicates a story about data. These infographics represent a succinct synthesis of thematic findings while honouring the voices of participants in an integrated way. Image 1 Image 2 and Image 3 are the infographic collages from each of the three focus groups.

## Research Process

### *Semi-structured Interviews:*

5 - 15-20 minute interviews were conducted with a school administrator and CAP dog handlers at each of the three schools that participated in study. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. At these interviews the following open-ended conversation questions or prompts were posed:

- Tell us about how the Sweet Charity Ambassador program was conceived/how did you get involved.
- Tell us about your experiences implementing the Sweet Charity Ambassador Program in your school/organization.
- In your opinion, describe how the program impacted:
  - The students at your school
  - The staff at your school
  - The students outside of your department at your school
  - The well-being of the students at your school
- Tell us about the benefits of the program
- Tell us about ways to improve the program
- Talk about other aspects of the program that you think we should know about?
- Describe what would help make the program better if it were run in your school again?

### *Analysis of the Semi-structured Interviews:*

Overall, Sweet Charity CAP handlers and school administrators at the schools were in-favour and supportive of the CAP program. The CAP dog handlers appeared to serve as champions of the CAP team at their schools. The stakeholders interviewed described a variety of positive impacts of the program on individual students, staff, and classrooms and on the school community. For example, interviewees reported that the CAP dogs:

- Facilitated students coming to and using the dog-supported services by creating a welcoming environment in the school. Students “sought out the dogs in their respective schools. Students checked in and asked when and where the dogs would be.”
- Made students feel more comfortable and less anxious, and that the dogs helped students talk openly with the handlers about feelings, thoughts and ideas.
- Impacted student behaviour as “quite often we have students that can get off task easily, and when they see (the dog) they (the dogs) calm them down.”
- Used the program as a reward or behavioral reinforcement for some of the students that have a hard time functioning in the regular classroom. ” If a student is in a bad mood, as soon as she sees (the dog), her mood changes directly.”

- Helped defuse situations that could become volatile, such as helping a student de-escalate during or after a conflict. For example “quite often if kids escalate the Principal and Vice-Principal will say let’s go to the library (where the CAP dog resides) and let’s calm down for a bit.”
- Helped the student deal with “emotional issues such as a death in family, stress or peer conflict.”
- The CAP dog is having a positive impact on staff at the school. One CAP dog handler reported that “I have staff show up, that I haven’t seen. And I’ll step out for a second and when I come in there’s a staff on the floor with the CAP dog. They spend their minute, 2 minutes to just re-direct themselves and calm down. I’m going to say I have 10 staff a week visit just to see her, even the Vice Principal is finding her very therapeutic”.
- The CAP dogs reportedly were having “a calming effect on the school community.”

The dog handlers also described the positive impact that the dogs had outside of their designated areas in the schools. For instance, they reported that CAP dogs:

- Were used to help moderate behaviours and conflict.
- Had a “positive impact on de-escalating escalating behaviours of students who are on the autism spectrum and who sometime become agitated”.

In general, the handlers and administrators noted that the dogs positively impacted their school experiences whether they were situated in their designated locations or elsewhere in the school.

Stakeholders also described challenges related to the Ambassador Dog program, and the dogs themselves. Dog-specific challenges, likely to be inherent in any dog-assisted program included:

- Student and staff allergies to dogs or fears of dogs. However, given this challenge, school administrators and staff noted that that solutions to this problem were easily found.

Program-specific challenges included:

- Balancing the time required by handlers to complete their training and their dogs’ training, with the need to have well-trained staff and dogs in schools

### *Focus Groups*

2 Elementary and 1 Secondary School participated in the focus groups. These schools were identified as CAP schools by school administrators, and the school principals agreed to participate in the study. Using posters and letters of invitation, participants were invited to the voluntary focus groups. Participants included (30) students, teachers, staff and parent/guardian participants. Each focus group was scheduled for 45 minutes.

At these focus groups, the following open-ended conversation questions or prompts were posed:

- Tell us about your experiences with the Sweet Charity Canine Ambassador Program at your school
- In your opinion, describe how the program impacted:
  - The students at your school.
  - The staff at your school.
  - Tell us about the benefits of the program.
  - Tell us about any challenges related to the program.
- Tell us about ideas to make the program better.
- Describe some of the outcomes you experienced as a result of the program.

In addition to the audio recordings, the focus group discussions were captured using an infographic collage process. An infographic artist created a visual display of information to represent the focus group discussion in a way that communicates a story about the data. These infographics represent a succinct synthesis of thematic findings while honoring the voices of participants in an integrated way. Image 1, Image 2. and Image 3. Represent the infographic for each of the focus groups held.

### *Analysis of the Focus Group Data:*

Overall, the participants of the focus groups were very positive about the CAP program in their respective schools.

### **Students**

- Students look forward to seeing the dog in their school
- Students talked about opening up and talking more in class when the dog was present
- Students talked about wanting to be at school and not skip classes when the dog was in class.
- Students talked about how the dogs were encouraging them to be mindful of their environment and clean up the class so the dog could come in safely.
- Students talked about how the dogs reduced their anxiety in class.

**Staff**

- Staff expressed that the dogs opened conversations between staff and students.
- Reduced conflict
- Helped them meet and talk with students whom they normally would not connect with.
- Improved attendance in classes when the dog was present.
- There was a sense of pride that the dogs were in the school.
- Kids were seeking out the dogs when they needed them.
- When the dog is present in class the classroom is often quieter
- The dogs are used as the “Band-Aid” in that “when the kid who is having a hard time sees the dog it changes their demeanor from sad to happy.”

**Community**

- The students and staff remarked that the CAP dogs brought happiness and comfort to the school.
- Helped reduce stress for everyone.
- Created a positive environment.
- At one school the CAP dog was voted Prom King.

The following are the infographic recordings of the three focus groups. These tell the story of the CAP programs in each school. They capture themes through student, staff and parent voice.





Image 1 – Infographic Focus Group 1



Image 2. – Infographic Focus Group 2

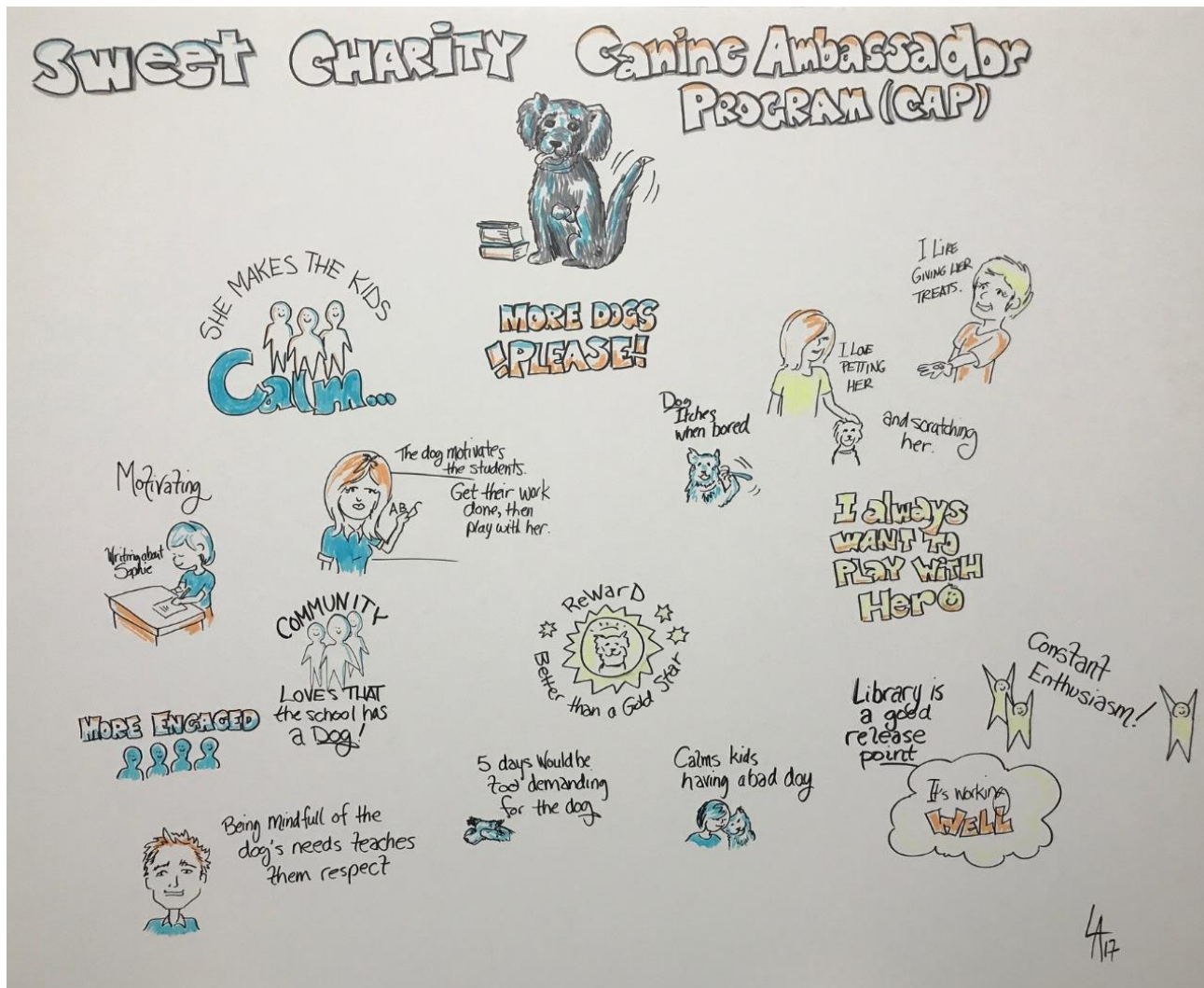


Image 3. Infographic Focus Group 3

Students and staff offered the following suggestions for improving the Ambassador Dog program:

- Have more dogs in each school, but not too many dogs to avoid the program becoming chaotic and too many days would be too demanding on the dog;
- Have dogs at school more frequently (e.g., “More than 1 day a week.”)
- Allow students more time with the dogs.

## Conclusions

The results of the analysis of the data derived from the interviews and focus groups related to the Sweet Charity CAP program offered at the SCDSB suggest that the Sweet Charity Canine Ambassador Program had a positive impact on the students and staff involved. In particular, students and staff reported that the dogs helped create a welcoming, warm and calm environment in their schools and in the service areas that they were located. In addition, it appears that the program also helped improve student well-being through reducing of stress, anxiety, and conflict. The dogs may have also helped fortify student-staff relationships, by enabling students and staff to connect in the presence of the dogs. It is evident from these focus groups and interviews that the CAP program had a positive impact on student mental health and wellness. In particular, it appears that the dogs positively impact student mood, anxiety and positively impact readiness to learn. In addition, it is noted that the CAP dogs were being leveraged as positive behavioural reinforcement to encourage pro-social behaviour.

Challenges related to the program were identified, including student and staff fears of dogs and dog allergies, concerns related to dog-related hygiene-issues and the time associated with training staff and their dogs to support students safety and effectively.

It is recommended that as the Sweet Charity program continues, that further research is conducted to determine CAP impacts on students' school experience, personal wellbeing, academic achievement, and anxiety and stress. In order to derive robust and generalizable results, such an outcomes evaluation would require a larger cohort of student participants across multiple school sites.

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