

Our Risk Management Plan



No meaningful endeavor is without risk, but we feel that with careful forethought risks can be both minimized and have an appropriate response in place if they do occur.

The following plan is divided into four groups identified as at-risk for some form of harm during our therapy sessions: Children, the visited facility (may be referred to as “the client”), the S.T.A.R. handlers, and the S.T.A.R. dogs. Risk mitigation strategies may affect more than one group, and so may appear in multiple sections.

Important: All parties need to be very clear that S.T.A.R. Team handlers are not psychotherapists – our teams are trained to support professionals working with at-risk youths.

Children:

1. All sessions will begin with a review of dog safety, including safe reward delivery.
2. No child will be compelled to interact with a S.T.A.R. dog. They will be allowed to choose when and how they are ready for interaction or physical contact. Tiny foldable fences are available for space management if needed.
3. Therapists/Counselors will determine in advance of the visit if there are food allergies to plan for, and will communicate this to the handler.
4. All treats for children to be in single-visit-size (~1 oz) packages that will be first opened in view of the counselor/teacher. Any leftovers that are not eaten by the handler are to be thrown away.
5. Anyone (child, handler, teacher) who dispenses treats will use handi-wipes or hand sanitizers to make sure their hands are clean. Handler to provide.
6. Children will be offered choice of hand sanitizers as they leave. Handler to provide.
7. All dogs will be clean and will be thoroughly brushed immediately before the visit to minimize shedding.
8. The path of the dog to the session location in a visited facility will be by the most direct route with as little contact to other rooms or non-participating students as possible.
 - Example: McKay Elementary – entry and exit with the dog is through a basement door on the same floor as the counseling room. Greeting children in the hall is kept to a minimum.
9. All S.T.A.R. dogs will have passed a proficiency test demonstrating their ability to interact safely with children from 4-years old and up, and to deal well with novel environments and activities.
10. All S.T.A.R. dogs will have demonstrated a safe and respectful greeting behavior to be used when meeting children.

- Example: Eli and Lili’s “hello” – rest your chin on the outstretched hand of the child and look up at them.
11. Toys may be used as a reward, but not toys that stimulate the dog to potentially dangerous behavior: e.g., tuggies, (examples will be added as identified)
 12. Although all children will be coached on safe conduct around dogs, all dogs will ALSO be counter-trained to perform an alternate behavior for signals that could lead to dangerous result.
 - Example: child dandles a treat far above the dog’s head, enticing it to jump up and grab it.
Counter-training: That dandle motion becomes a “sit” signal.
 - Examples to be added as they are identified, and included in all handler training.

The Facility:

1. In arranging S.T.A.R. team visits, the handler and the teacher/counselor/therapist will mutually decide and abide by:
 - Arrival time and length of visit
 - How EXACTLY changes in schedule will be communicated in a timely fashion (e.g., dog sick, handler sick, children sick, no children present that day to work with)
 - What, if any, additional training the handler will need to best support the facility (e.g., approved class on the effects of domestic violence on a child’s brain)
 - What, if any, additional screening is required by the facility (e.g., background checks, fingerprinting)
 - How (or if) information pertaining to a visit should be recorded by the handler for communication to the teacher/counselor/therapist.
 - Whether the S.T.A.R. team can store routinely used props at the facility.
 - Example: Eli and Lili have a soft hassock (to raise them off the floor) and a “safe place” (see “Concepts” document) stored out of the way at each client.
2. The handler will comply with all visitor/volunteer protocols required by the facility, including but not limited to signing in/out and wearing an identifying badge.
 - Example: DV shelter A – handler is buzzed in by staff, signs in and out in two logs, and wears a facility badge
 - Example: Elementary School – handler *without dog* signs in and out at the office, wears a disposable facility badge, enters *with dog* through a side door.
 - Example: DV shelter B – handler and dog are buzzed in and escorted down to the playroom. No facility badge, no sign in/out.
3. The handler will have an ID badge issued by The Little Dog Laughed AAT on their person at all times during a visit. This badge will include their photo on one side and basic insurance information on the other.

4. Liability insurance will be maintained by The Little Dog Laughed AAT covering handlers, dogs, and client facilities.
5. Prior to any activity in which a S.T.A.R. dog/handler team will be representing our organization (including but not limited to classes, demos, workshops and therapy visits), The Little Dog Laughed AAT will secure a certificate of insurance coverage for that location and provide it to the host/client.
6. Included in the handler's travel kit for all visits:
 - Poop pick-up bags – the S.T.A.R. handlers will be entirely responsible for any clean-up activities.
 - A small towel to be placed under the dog's water bowl.
 - A small spray bottle of Nature's Miracle – in the event of an indoor accident, the S.T.A.R. handler will make sure the area is thoroughly clean and de-scented.
 - Hand sanitizers (small travel size, more than one scent) and Handi-wipes.

Handlers:

1. All handlers are strongly encouraged to stay up-to-date on flu vaccines.
2. S.T.A.R. teams will pass a certification test before they go into the field.
3. All handlers will receive training by Little Dog staff and professionals engaged for that purpose, both in preparation for the certification test, in preparation for field work once the test is passed, and as a "refresher" course at least twice a year.
4. The handler will have an ID card issued by The Little Dog Laughed AAT on their person at all times during a visit. This card will include relevant insurance information.
5. Handlers will always have a teacher/counselor/therapist either in the room or readily available to manage the children.
6. UNLESS IN A SESSION SPECIFICALLY DESIGNED AND MONITORED BY THE TEACHER / COUNSELOR / THERAPIST the handler will work with no more than two children at a time, preferable only one at a time.
7. S.T.A.R. teams will not work with children who have actively abused an animal – that is a different specialty altogether.

Dogs:

1. All dogs will stay up-to-date on vaccines as recommended by their veterinarian, and will be tested for worms annually.
2. S.T.A.R. dogs will be on-leash unless working in an approved location.
3. S.T.A.R. dogs will be licensed as required by their county of residence, but the handler may choose to use an alternate form of ID during visits (eg, a collar embroidered with contact information) to eliminate problems caused by dangling tags.

4. All props and toys will be appropriately sized for the dog, clean and stoutly constructed.
Guideline: If it is designated as safe for a 3-year-old human child (e.g., A Fisher-Price toddler toy), it is a candidate for a prop.
5. Toys and props are CUES for specific behaviors, and need to be removed from the dog's sight as soon as the activity is complete.
6. To avoid creating conflict with existing training for competitive sports, the handlers are **strongly** advised to create a parallel set of instructions that are more intuitive to a child and less rigorous in compliance restrictions.
 - Example: "Front" is frequently used in Obedience for a very specific action and body placement by the dog. Recognizing that a child (a) has no recognition of that use of the word, and (b) has little interest in maintaining the same rigor that the handler needs in the ring, we recommend an alternate cue like "here!" accompanied by the physical cue of slapping the front of the legs.
 - Safety Example: Knowing that it is very common for a child to dandle a treat far above the dog's head, enticing it to jump up and grab it, the handler should counter-train their dog so that dandle motion becomes a "sit" signal.
7. Playing with the dog with their "special" ball or other toy is an acceptable reinforcement, but tuggy-type toys should be used with extreme caution if at all.
8. All S.T.A.R. dogs will be given the opportunity to thoroughly relieve themselves before entering the building. The handler is responsible for packing out any poop (if there is no external garbage can, put the bag in the car. Do not take it inside.)
9. If the dog is stressing, the handler **MUST** deal with the problem immediately. Training will be provided on how dogs show stress, and ways to safely manage the situation.
10. Included in the handler's travel kit for all visits:
 - Water in a wide-mouthed container (make no assumptions about availability of water) – pack in, pack out.
 - A water bowl and a small towel to go under it.
 - Suitable treats + extras
 - A "safe place" – this can be a crate, a dog bed, etc. where the dog can be safely confined if the dog is stressing or is getting confused (note – this may be kept at the facility if visits are regular).