

Service Dogs Aid People With Autism

By Merope Pavlides

There is a Native American legend that says that after creating humankind, the Spirits created a chasm between their world and ours. And although Dog had the opportunity to return to the spirit world, at the last moment, he leapt over the widening gap to remain with us. Scientifically speaking, archeological records confirm that the relationship between humans and canines dates back at least 14,000 years. Since the beginning dogs have been not just companions but workers as well, helping us hunt and driving other prey animals away from human encampments. Throughout history they have farmed with us, fought with us, and played with us. It's no surprise that humans would turn to dogs for assistance in managing disabilities.

Although artistic representations throughout history show dogs leading the blind, the first formal use of this partnership came after World War I, when German Shepherd Dogs were enlisted to help blinded veterans in Germany. The success of this practice spawned programs in other countries, and by the 1970s assistance dogs were being trained to work with partners with numerous disabilities. Dogs now work alongside people with hearing loss, with mobility challenges, with seizure disorders, and with increasing frequency, autism. Assistance dogs are not pets, nor are they therapy animals. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, assistance animals "are individually trained to perform tasks for people with disabilities" and are thus guaranteed public access.

The primary motivation for obtaining an assistance dog is increased independence and community inclusion. However, assistance dogs also provide their human partners with social and emotional support, and what's referred to as "social capital." Studies indicate that being partnered with an assistance dog can increase emotional well-being of individuals with disabilities, and increase social interactions, both short and long-term.

For individuals with autism, an increase in avenues for social acceptance and interaction is extremely meaningful.

The Role of the Autism Service Dog

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of discussing autism service dogs is how much variety there is in the tasks assigned to these workers. And although each assistance dog must be trained to work in tandem with its specific human partner, there is a bit more consistency in training traditional guide and service dogs than with autism service dogs whose duties may include:

- Keeping a child with autism from eloping or dangerous bolting:

For many parents, the foremost concern regarding their child with autism is running away or bolting unexpectedly into dangerous environments, such as traffic. Often outings become difficult to physically manage with a child prone to elopement, especially if siblings are present as well. When used in this capacity, a service dog is often tethered in some way to the child, while the parent holds a leash. Some children will learn to hold a service dog's harness and become reliable to not let go, although an adult still holds an additional leash. Dogs are then trained to stop or block a child's movements.

- Alerting parents to escape or injurious behaviors:

Not only do many children with autism attempt to elope in public environments, often escape from the home is a problem as well. In this case, the autism service dog may become responsible for alerting parents or caretakers to successful, or even attempted, escapes. In addition, some dogs will alert whenever a child engages in certain dangerous activities, such as climbing onto furniture or window ledges. There is also the potential for utilizing autism service dogs for seizure alerting, although the ability to sense an oncoming seizure isn't a skill that all dogs possess. A dog obtained to work with an individual with an ASD prior to onset of seizure activity may be able to develop this skill, although many will not.

- Being involved in search and rescue activities:

Although most assistance dog organizations do not train dogs in tracking, a few do. For children with a history of successful elopement, a dog that can locate a missing child may be an extremely important asset.

- Facilitating sensory integration and calming:

Parents of children with autism service dogs frequently comment on how much calmer their children are, and how much more manageable meltdowns are when the dog is present. For many families, this includes a positive change in sleeping behaviors on the part of the child. Thus far, no research has been conducted into why or how this calming effect occurs. There may be several things at work here, including sensory integration, social support, and interruption and redirection of the tantrum behavior. While this task may seem more akin to those performed by therapy dogs, many families cannot easily manage public outings without a method of calming the individual with autism.

- Being fundamentally used for social support and lubrication:

For people utilizing assistance dogs for other disabilities, companionship and social support is a function that may be secondary to the specific tasks assigned to the dog. In the case of individuals with autism, however, social challenges are central to the disability. Service dogs can provide a level of comfort in social situations for these individuals, and perhaps more importantly, create a social conduit for interacting with other people.

The parameters of the training will usually be set by the service dog agency. Some service providers focus on child safety, while others concentrate on the therapeutic nature of the relationship.

The Pros and Cons of Getting a Service Dog

A service dog can help provide safety, management of difficult behaviors, increased impulse-control in the child, calming sensory input, development of social opportunities and skills, and often most importantly, increased ability to function in public. But having a service dog is not a panacea for the challenges of living with autism. Nor can a service dog be turned off or put away at the end of the day. Service dogs, especially ones undergoing stressful work days, need time for relaxation and play. So for a service dog to be right for a family, it is necessary that having a dog is an appropriate choice for the family.

Although it may not be necessary for the child with autism to be a dog lover for the relationship with a service dog to be successful, it is necessary that the child not be extremely fearful of dogs. It is possible to undertake a protocol to minimize the

reactivity on the part of a child with autism to the presence of dogs. But this kind of protocol is intended to allow the child to navigate a world filled with pet dogs, not work closely with a service dog. If siblings or other family members are profoundly afraid of dogs, a service dog placement may also be inappropriate. The outcome of obtaining a service dog should be to help lower the stress and challenges in the home, not increase them.

Another extremely important consideration in applying for a service dog is the amount of time, energy and willingness that exists on the part of the parents to train, work with, and handle the dog. Although in typical service dog partnerships the individual with the disability handles the dog, a third party handler is usually necessary with autism service dogs. One or both parents must often receive extensive education in training and handling the dog, and often have to teach caregivers and educators to handle the dog as well. The dog's work skills must be monitored and maintained. In addition, as the child develops, changes may need to be made to the working protocol. New behaviors (for better or worse) on the part of the child may require new responses on the part of the dog.

Acquiring a Service Dog

If obtaining an autism service dog seems an appropriate choice, the next step becomes obtaining one. It is imperative that each family considering this option carefully examines goals and expectations for the service dog in researching how to best acquire a dog. Unfortunately, there are not enough service providers for all the families who want autism service dogs, and waiting lists can be long. In the United States, there are no regulations governing the training of service dogs, so it becomes incumbent on the family to investigate whether an organization or private trainer has the credentials and specialization to meet specific needs.

Perhaps the most important skill any service provider must have is the ability to match the dog to the child and family. This means accurately assessing the family's needs and the dog's personality and potential. The organization must have access to dogs suited to working as autism service dogs—dogs that are hard working, bright, socially motivated, and generally unflappable. Although it is possible for a family to train the service dog independently, this is an extremely difficult task even with the help of a trainer. Dogs given public access must be taught appropriate skills, not only for the comfort and safety of the public, but to insure continued community inclusion by service dogs. Training a service dog requires a level of skill and investment of time and energy that most families dealing with autism can't spare. A carefully bred, selected, and trained service dog costs service providers approximately \$20,000 up until the time the dog is placed with a family. Each organization differs in terms of how these expenses are managed. Some charge a percentage of the cost directly to the family, others charge little and rely on other sources for funding. (Most service dog providers are registered as non-profit corporations.) In addition, whether the service provider helps contribute to the cost of lifelong care for the dog differs. It is crucial to understand the costs of not only obtaining a service dog, but of caring for the dog appropriately throughout its lifespan, including the dog's retirement years.

Public Access Issues

Ease of public access with a service dog can vary based on community familiarity with assistance dogs. Under federal law, businesses can neither deny a service dog entrance nor can the dog and its partner be segregated from the rest of the clientele.

For families that have a member with autism, including a service dog in public outings can provide an increased level of community inclusion, as well as heightened safety. Because many individuals with autism are calmer and less likely to tantrum when with a service dog, outings can be more successful. Many individuals with autism can be taught to interact with the service dog when feeling overwhelmed by the sensory input from public environments. For others, the dog serves to keep the public at a distance, allowing the family more personal space. Some parents feel more comfortable in public because strangers now understand that their child has a disability and no longer comment on what's perceived to be bad parenting. Still others use the service dog as a conduit to social interaction, encouraging strangers to ask the individual with autism about his canine partner.

The public has become increasingly educated about the "rules" surrounding working service dogs and knows not to approach or interact with them. In obtaining an autism service dog, however, it is important to discuss with the service provider what kind of public interactions are desired. Most organizations train their dogs not to interact with the public when wearing the identifying vest; however, if the dog is intended primarily as a social conduit, public approach may be encouraged. Service dog patches can be customized to allow petting after asking. Some families simply remove the dog's vest on those occasions when socialization is desired, and utilize the vest for public outings in which safety and behavior management is more urgent. (However, service dogs usually perceive themselves as "off-duty" when their vest comes off, and are more prone to engaging in relaxed behaviors.)

The biggest hurdle facing many families who obtain an autism service dog is enabling the dog to accompany the child to school. Many school systems immediately reject this notion, citing the welfare of other students. (Although ADA regulations clearly state that allergies or fear on the part of the public does not constitute a legitimate reason to deny service dog access.) The fundamental problem in sending a child with autism to school with a service dog is the need for an adult dog handler. If the child already attends school with an aide, this person may be trained to handle the dog. If however, the child's education plan does not include one-on-one support, school systems are often loathe to consider service dog placement. Parents are faced with the challenge of advocating for school access for the service dog, often requiring they take legal action. Some families will determine this legal battle is too labor intensive and costly, while others may push onward. It is important to understand that school access for an autism service dog cannot, unfortunately, be assumed. Provision of this accommodation, however, can go a long way in allowing children with autism to be more successful in a school environment, promoting safety, behavior management, and social achievement.

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