

ASSISTANCE DOGS FOR A CHILD WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Children with disabilities present a unique set of challenges and needs to parents and the family unit as a whole. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) present parents with unique and complex set of additional challenges. Often children with ASD do not connect well with others or their environment.

ASD manifests with impairments in both communication and social relationships. This is known as the Triad of Impairment

1. Pervasive Difficulties in the area of understanding and coping with interpersonal relationships and social interactions.
2. Impairment in the development, application and understanding of all forms of communication - verbal and non verbal communication skills. Children with Autism are often nonverbal or when they are verbal they usually do not use the skill to actively communicate with other people in their environment
3. Impaired ability to cope with change in environment, routine and surroundings. Many children with ASD have a very strong need to have and maintain a structured, routine environment; change can create feelings of fear and/or anxiety. Some children even exhibit serious behavioral changes including, at times, self-injury

Associated with the triad of impairment are various behavioural difficulties (restricted interests and repetitive behaviours) and abnormal sensory responses. For Example: over or under sensitivity to sight, touch, taste, smell, sound, temperature and pain. As a result people with ASD often experience overwhelming anxiety, frustration and confusion when faced with the stresses of everyday life.

Children with ASD often have a tendency to wander away and escape from even the most secure environments. Families living with a child with ASD often have multiple locks on all doors and windows in the family home. Children with ASD do not have the same sense of safety and can put themselves in life-threatening situations beyond the physical sight of the parent or carer e.g. an approaching



car, a stranger with ill intentions, an aggressive dog etc. Children with ASD do not respond to their names and as you can imagine parents are always on alert.

Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disabilities presently confronting Australian Communities. Autism is accompanied by considerable personal suffering, parental burden and community cost. Autism does not discriminate and can be found throughout all ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. Autism was first described by Dr. Leo Kanner, of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, in 1943. Around the same time, Dr. Hans Asperger described a milder form of the disorder which became known as Asperger's syndrome. Both Autism and Asperger's disorders are listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-IV-TR (fourth edition, text revision). Autism and Asperger's are two of the five pervasive developmental disorders (PDD) commonly referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

The term 'Autism Spectrum Disorders' (ASD) is an umbrella term that includes Autistic disorder (sometimes called infantile Autism or childhood Autism); Asperger's disorder and Atypical Autism. Although, ASD are almost always present at birth, they generally do not become evident until the age of 2 or 3; or 5 or 6 in the case of Asperger's disorder.

Internationally, ASD affects 1 in 154 persons throughout the world. The cause of ASD remains unknown and to date there is no established cure. Treatments for ASD consist of numerous interventions aimed at assisting families to manage the condition. ASD disorders are lifelong disabilities characterized by varying degrees of impairment in communication skills, social interactions, and restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior. 50% of people with ASD will not develop any meaningful speech in their lifetime.

We have a number of desires in introducing service dogs for children with Autism

1. To protect children with ASD from common threats to safety and injury through escape.
2. Support families who have a family member with an ASD.
3. Enable children with autism and their families to develop and maintain the highest degree of independence possible.
4. Experience and enjoy maximum involvement in their local communities, using the assistance dog as a bridge to develop positive relationships with peers.
5. Enjoy an enriched lifestyle.
6. Connect persons with Autism into the community.
7. Provide a stabilization influence in child socialization experiences.
8. Develop the skill of empathy.
9. Act as a buffer for common anxieties experienced by children with ASD
10. Interrupt repetitive behaviours before sensory overload is experienced.

As initial data suggests ASD has become a significant issue for Australian communities and our project will assist families and health care initiatives to provide practical support to families and persons with ASD.

Training Program

Children with ASD will have both general and specific needs for an assistance dog. The dogs will be trained for a number of general supporting behaviours and when placement arrives we will "partner" with our families to tailor the dog to best meet the child's and families needs.

A common behavioural trait of a child with ASD is the propensity to wander off-even from a secure environment. Given the child's condition, escape can lead to a life-threatening situation. Often children with ASD do not respond to their name and they rarely comprehend environmental dangers e.g. an approaching car, an aggressive dog etc. '4 Paws for Ability' have partnered with us to educate our trainers to train the dog to track (through scenting) an autistic child that has wandered off, even if this child has been missing for an extended period- this approach is similar to the search and rescue dog training undertaken by the Police Dogs. The dog will quickly lead an adult carer to the child.



Children with ASD live in a world where they participate in ritualistic and repetitive behaviours e.g. spinning a coin on the floor, slapping themselves etc- these behaviours can repeat themselves for hours and can manifest as a precursor to sensory overload- meltdowns. Many parents report that a simple touch on the child's arm can disrupt the behaviour. An assistance dog would also be trained to disrupt these behaviours. For example, a child who repeatedly slaps themselves can have this behaviour disrupted by the assistance dog simply laying their nose on the leg or foot of the child nudging them to stop the repetitive behavior, even if for a few minutes.

There is a magical relationship that exists between ASD children and dogs. Most parents of children with ASD identify a common need- that their child with ASD has very few friends, if any. Children with ASD struggle to form and maintain social relationships. The dog becomes a pivotal companion for the child and often a gateway for other children to want to connect through the dog. 4 Paws for Ability have found that children with ASD seem to form bonds and relate to their assistance dogs in ways they are unable to with other children and even adults within their own families. Children with ASD display behaviours toward their dog that they rarely, if ever, display towards human companions. Children with ASD that have an assistance dog have been observed to seek their dog out for companionship, comfort and confidence, in ways that are never shown to family members. They also tend to show greater sensitivity towards the needs and feelings of the dog and a lesser level of general anger and aggression. Often children with ASD do not like to be touched or hugged by people, but seem to enjoy the tactile stimulation of their assistance dog.

Assistance dogs are also taught to partner a child with Autism into public settings e.g. school, shopping centers etc. The dog is taught how to keep its self and the child safe and protected at all times. The dogs will be trained to stop and sit any time the parent requests, for example, the parent might need to write a check and have their attention distracted from the child- with an assistance dog, the parent can halt the dog which will halt the child.

Our mission is to raise, train and place assistance dogs with children with Autism Spectrum Disorders to provide friendship, companionship, unconventional, and unconditional love for the child. Our desire is that the dog will become a source of comfort and consistency when environments change and anxiety levels might tend to rise, to help a child with ASD and the family to experience a higher level of quality of life and bring more independence to the child as they are able to encounter problems and obstacles within life, providing



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coping mechanisms and a higher level of safety and security for both child and parent/care giver.

Throughout the United States both teachers, therapists and parents found including assistance dogs with a child with ASD into their therapy sessions has shown a marked increase in the child's participation and functioning levels.