

Autism Service Dogs as Faithful Companions

By Comfort for Critters

"A child who connects to a dog, connects to the world," says Autism Service Dogs of America. This group, and others like it, provides a unique and valuable service to families affected by this condition. Autism Spectrum Disorder is defined by its leading advocate, Autism Speaks, as "a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors."

Being a spectrum disorder, specific difficulties are highly variable between individuals. Without a doubt though, Autism Service Dogs can assist many of these individuals, beyond the numerous benefits we all enjoy by sharing our life and home with a dog.

ASDs are trained to perform tasks, quite similar to the ones other service dogs perform for individuals with other sensory processing disabilities. Autism can affect the way a person sees and interacts with the world. Since an autistic person processes information in a different way, they sort through both major and minor stimuli, sometimes equally. It may not be immediately obvious, which of the many stimuli requires their immediate attention.

ASDs are trained to help their companion process this sensory information. They can alert their companion to an important noise, or other stimuli, which requires an immediate reaction. The dog's gentle reminders, tell their companion to focus on the event which the dog is indicating. Breeds known for their high intelligence and gentle nature are typically used, including Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retrievers, Yorkshire Terriers and Standard Poodles.

Not all autistic individuals exhibit these issues, but the typical ASD is trained to respond in these very specific ways to troublesome behavior:

- Self-harming - Dog will interrupt behavior
- Overstimulation/meltdown/shutdown - Dog will apply deep pressure tasks, for instance: step on foot, paws on lap, lie on companion
- Poor balance/motor control - Dog will offer counterbalance or brace for stability
- Disorientation - Dog can help find a parked car, lead the person home or find other specified places
- Auditory processing issues - Dog will alert to important sounds
- Visual processing issues - Dog can help steer around obstacles

Besides this very practical assistance, ASDs can provide a "social bridge" for children who are sometimes secluded by others. These highly-trained dogs provide comfort, companionship and a calm demeanor.

The benefits to owning one of these assistance dogs seem to be immeasurable. By increasing the child's safety, the overall stress on the family is decreased. They also promote social interaction, as a dog easily draws the attention of an autistic child. They can increase a child's independence, since they do not need to be constantly holding a parent's hand, when they are walking with their ASD. If a child has a tendency to run, the dog can easily track them and guide them home.

Quite possibly, the companionship-factor is the most endearing. These dogs actually promote an increased vocabulary, as children are typically quite comfortable speaking to their ASD. This transfers to more verbal interaction with people. These dogs also have an overall calming effect, as their companions feel a lot less pressure working with "man's best friend," than they might feel working with peers.

Those of us who are lucky enough to live with dogs, know what a wonderful companion they are. It's even more wonderful to see how they can assist autistic individuals who have so much to offer the world.

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