

BEYOND FRIENDSHIP

Dogs can be valued therapeutic companions for people with autism

BY C J PUOTINEN

Kids and dogs. Everyone agrees they go together, but for children with autism, dogs can be far more than best friends. They can be therapists, comforters, mood stabilizers, and conversation starters. They can help wandering children stay home, help distracted children stay focused, improve a child's communication and social skills, and help everyone in the family relax.

Wisconsin residents Rachel and Terry knew their daughter Prudence was different: she didn't interact with other children, had a short attention span, struggled to express herself, was easily distracted by sounds, tastes, smells, and movement, often felt anxious, and found comfort in repetitive behaviors and language. Two years ago, at age four, she was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). "The autism diagnosis scared us but it made sense," says Rachel. "We searched for anything that could help her."

PUPPY LOVE

During that search, Rachel discovered Blessings Unleashed, a non-profit organization that pairs children on the spectrum with autism service dogs (also called autism assistance dogs). In early 2011, a yellow Labrador Retriever named Kaiya officially became Prudence's service dog. As soon as the two met, Prudence lay next to Kaiya and didn't want to



A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND—Prudence knows she can rely on Kaiya.

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According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, service dogs have been trained to do work or perform tasks that benefit individuals with disabilities and must be allowed access to businesses and organizations that serve the public.

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leave her side. Without any prompting, she told her parents, "Kaiya makes me feel better."

Autism service dogs can be trained to go after a child who is running away and return the child to the parent, interrupt repetitious or self-harming behaviors, calm a child who is having a tantrum by crawling onto the child's lap, alert parents if the child wakes at night, and improve the child's verbal skills by responding to spoken commands. At Blessings Unleashed, Kaiya was trained to lean or "snuggle" on Prudence when the girl is having a meltdown, interrupt repetitive behaviors by nudging or licking her hand to break the cycle, and to track and find her if she becomes separated from her family.

Now, six months later, Rachel and Terry are amazed at how in tune Kaiya is to Prudence's needs. "If Prudence cries or screams," says Rachel, "Kaiya is immediately at her side to provide comfort. Kaiya sleeps on Prudence's bed every night, and we often wake in the morning to hear Prudence talking to Kaiya, which is wonderful for her speech development and pragmatic language skills. One day we went to a party where we couldn't take Kaiya, and the experience was difficult for Prudence. As soon as we returned home she ran to the dog and said, 'Kaiya, I wish you were at the party—I missed you so much!'"



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GUARD DOG—Autism assistance dogs can be trained to follow a wandering child and return him to his parents.

Kaiya's most significant impact may be her calming effect. "Prudence is much more present and less anxious with Kaiya around," says Rachel. "We've noticed less scripted speech and more spontaneous conversation." An added benefit is the improvement Rachel and Terry have seen in Prudence's awareness of others. "Because she's responsible for feeding and brushing Kaiya, she has started to show a greater interest in others," Rachel continues. "She now plays with baby dolls, feeding them, holding them, singing to them, walking them around in a stroller, and putting them to bed every night. She showed little interest in this before Kaiya arrived. She also plays and talks with her little sister. We couldn't be more thrilled!"

THErapy DOGS AT WORK

Service dogs aren't the only four-legged therapists that help children with autism. Therapy dogs make a difference, too. Unlike service dogs, which are permanently paired with their human partners, therapy dogs belong to volunteers who take them to nursing homes, hospitals, schools, and other facilities, usually for an hour at a time. Their visits are considered Animal Assisted Activity or Animal Assisted Therapy, depending on whether the visits have specific, documented therapeutic goals.

For over 10 years, Reading Education Assistance Dogs® (therapy dogs participating in the R.E.A.D.® literacy program) have visited schools and libraries, where children read out loud to them. Seven-year-old Joshua had trouble making sense of human emotions until one of his therapists started taking him to read to a dog named Journey. "Until then," says his mother, Ginger Rasmussen, "he was indifferent to animals, as though they were a piece of furniture or a stuffed toy. But after he began reading to

CONFIDENCE BUILDER

Six years ago, at the Southeast Regional Facility of Canine Companions for Independence (CCI), an organization that breeds, raises, and trains service dogs for children and adults with disabilities, Xander Rousseau met his service dog for the first time. "It took three days of working with several different dogs before we had our official match," recalls his mother, Adrienne Levesque, "and Xander had his heart set on a black Lab named Woody. The entire class cheered when his wish was granted."

On their first Friday night at CCI, Woody slept in the family's dorm room. "It was the first night in Xander's illness history that he slept through the night," says Adrienne, who is a founding and current board member of the National Autism Association. "It was a miracle." At the conclusion of the two weeks orientation, Xander was answering simple questions about 'his dog.' "He even hugged Woody's trainer," his mom recalls. "Wow... in two short weeks we were rejoicing over major milestones."



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Journey, he started petting his own dog and cat, started talking to them and interacting lovingly with them, and before long he began caring and asking why the baby was crying or why mom was happy. He began to feel empathy. Reading to Journey gave Josh the last piece of the puzzle to make him whole. The quiet patience of a R.E.A.D. dog opened a door that we thought was locked forever."

As the *New York Times* reported last year, visits from therapy dogs have become part of the curriculum at the Anderson Center for Autism in Staatsburgh, NY. One nonverbal 11-year-old boy who at first hid from Shadow, a black Lab, now asks to walk, pet, and feed her, interactions that help him communicate with teachers and fellow students. A California teacher who brings her therapy dog to school tried for years to teach one boy to say hello and goodbye. He began greeting the dog, then the teacher, and now he says hello and goodbye to his classmates.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT—Xander at age seven with his new friend Woody.

For the past six years, Woody has provided Xander with constant acceptance and affection, accompanying the boy to hospitals where he underwent tests and surgeries, as well as to stores and other busy places that had previously been overwhelming. “Woody has made it possible for us to navigate a parking lot without the fear that Xander would run away,” Adrienne says. “Woody visited school at the beginning of each year so that Xander could transition successfully, and he became Xander’s motivation to work hard in the various therapy programs we used.”

With Woody’s help, Xander moved from the non-verbal, self-stimulating world of rocking and moaning to a life less dominated by ASD symptoms. “Is he cured? No,” says Adrienne. “We still face communication and social hardships. We still battle digestive and seizure disorders. Hopefully we will continue to prevail, battle by battle, until we can say we have completely defeated autism.”

Today 13-year-old Xander is in eighth grade, where he is enrolled in academically advanced classes, enjoys the swim team, and plays year-round soccer. “We rejoice over the fact that he has many friends,” says Levesque, “the best of which remains his faithful Lab, Woody.”

MATCHMAKING

Although the demand for autism dogs has created many approaches to this type of therapy, the field’s established foundations focus on careful breeding, raising, training, placement, and follow-up for these special animals and



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the families that adopt them. The traits that make good service dogs are well documented and can be tested for at a young age. Because of their stable temperament and intelligence, Golden Retrievers, Labrador Retrievers, and Golden/Labrador-Retriever crosses are widely used.

Eighteen years ago, in what she calls the “dark ages” of autism, Patty Dobbs Gross turned to Canine Companions for Independence on behalf of her son, Danny, whom the organization paired with Madison, a Golden Retriever. “Madison helped Danny grow into the emotionally balanced and socially confident young man he is today,” she says. “He’s currently a graduate student at the University of Southern California’s School of Cinematic Arts.”

Madison so inspired Gross that she went on to create the North Star Foundation, which, during the past 10 years, has placed over 100 unique assistance dogs with children who face social, emotional, and educational challenges. Her program differs from that of most service dog organizations because instead of placing trained adult dogs with children, North Star places carefully screened puppies with carefully screened families. Puppy and child grow up together, and the entire family participates in the puppy’s training.

CAREFUL TRAINING

“We educate parents carefully over a long period of time to be sure they provide the necessary supervision and training,” says Gross, “and we screen out children who lash out physically when upset. Having this happen is the only reason besides neglect for which we would remove a dog from a home, and we once went to court to do this.

Gross emphasizes that in a service dog team it is very important to ensure that the dog’s needs are met as well as the child’s, in order to keep the placement safe as well as effective. “Our dogs ‘work’ for their children, not just the parents,” she explains, “but this is because we actually breed specifically for dogs who take a shine to children, and then

CAN YOU AFFORD IT?

Because of their successful fundraising, Canine Companions for Independence and Guiding Eyes for the Blind provide service dogs to children with autism at no cost, but most service dog organizations ask families to pay part or all of the considerable cost of raising and training these special animals.

North Star asks families to raise half of a service dog’s \$10,000 placement cost (\$5,000). Wilderwood Service Dogs requires families to raise the full cost of each service dog (\$12,000), as does Autism Service Dogs of America (\$13,500). Blessings Unleashed asks families to pay the full cost of a service dog (\$10,500) or companion dog (\$5,500). Companion dogs provide emotional support and do not require the extensive training that service dogs receive.

When Prudence’s parents began raising money to pay for Kaiya, they reached their goal in less than two months. “Fundraising may seem like a daunting task,” says Rachel, “but it helps to just tell your story. People often feel helpless and don’t know what to say or do for a family affected by autism. Our supporters were excited about Kaiya and most had no idea that service dogs were being utilized to help people with autism.”

STILL GOING STRONG—Xander, now 13, with his trusted companion Woody.



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we socialize them for children in general and for their own child specifically.”

Gross and her trainers use positive reinforcement training methods exclusively, so North Star dogs are never punished. Instead, they are encouraged to think and act independently. “We strongly disapprove of programs that use ‘tether dogs’ or ‘babysitter dogs’ that are physically tied to children with autism,” she says. “That’s cruel to the dog and can be dangerous for both.”

On five separate occasions, North Star dogs have kept their children safe from wandering, once by delivering a warning bark when the child was taking off, once by nudging the child homeward, and three times by simply following the wandering child until someone noticed the team, read the dog’s collar, and notified the family. “But safety is not our primary goal,” Gross notes. “Our primary focus is meeting our children’s social, emotional, and educational needs.”

SCIENTIFIC SUPPORT

For years, reports about the benefits of canine companionship for children with autism were considered heartwarming anecdotes of no scientific importance.

Then researchers began taking a closer look. In 2008, the *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education* described the challenges faced by families of children with autism paired with service dogs, including public-access issues, learning to understand canine behavior, the

extra work involved, training commitments, financial responsibilities, and the dog’s impact on family dynamics. “Despite the effects and consequences of these challenges,” researchers concluded, “parents overwhelmingly reported that having a service dog to keep their child safe and to provide companionship was well worth the many inconveniences of service-dog ownership.”

At Maryville College in Maryville, Tennessee, Ariane K. Schratter, PhD., associate professor of psychology, developed an ongoing community-based research partnership with Wilderwood Service Dogs to study the effects of using specially trained dogs for children with autism. “After the first year with their service dog,” says Dr. Schratter, “parents tended to report decreased problem behaviors such as aggression, fear, and arousal, and an increase in adaptive behaviors, such as eye contact, joint attention, and social inhibition. Many of the children showed improvement in their overall level of functioning.”

Dr Schratter believes the dogs likely also elicit positive social interactions in public, helping children with autism to successfully interact with others. “The dogs’ presence may also reduce physiological arousal at the root of some problem behaviors while providing clear

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HAPPY TOGETHER—Prudence and Kaiya call it a day.



CONSIDER THE COMMITMENT



Bringing a service or companion dog into a household requires commitment. In addition to basic care, these dogs need ongoing training with the entire family, close supervision from parents, and ample play, exercise, and downtime. In many ways, bringing a service dog into the family is like adopting a child. Families with canine experience, a fondness for animals, and good organizing skills have a head start.

As Rachel explains, “Our responsibilities for Kaiya include working on her service dog skills daily, keeping her well-groomed, feeding her a high-quality dog food, and keeping her in peak physical condition. When Kaiya isn’t working, it’s important for her to be a regular dog, so when she is at home we make time every day for her favorite game—frisbee! We also have to take yearly public-access tests that demonstrate Kaiya’s service dog skills, in order to be re-certified as Kaiya’s handlers. Having a service dog is definitely an added responsibility with two small children, but the rewards have been many and we are so thankful to have Kaiya in our lives.”

and consistent nonverbal communication cues that children with autism can interpret, thus increasing their adaptive skills,” she goes on. “The data suggest that the innovative use of specially trained service dogs may be an important tool for helping the social and language behaviors of children with autism.”

STRESS RELIEF

One of the most widely reported benefits of canine-child interaction is reduced anxiety. Now researchers think they know why dogs have such a calming effect. In September 2010, the medical journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology* published a study that compared levels of the stress hormone cortisol in 42 children with ASD before and during the introduction of a service dog into their families and after the dogs were removed for a short period.

“We found that the introduction of service dogs translated into a statistically significant diminished cortisol awakening response (CAR),” they reported. “Before the introduction of service dogs, we measured a 58-percent increase in morning cortisol after awakening, which diminished to 10 percent when service dogs were present. The increase in morning cortisol jumped back to 48 percent once the dogs were removed from the families... These results show that the CAR of children with ASD is sensitive to the presence of service dogs, which lends support to the potential behavioral benefits of service dogs for children with autism.”

IS A SERVICE DOG IN YOUR CHILD’S FUTURE?

It would be wonderful if dogs improved the lives of all children with autism, and if all dogs paired with children lived happy, relaxed, fulfilling lives of their own. But service dogs aren’t for everyone, and not every child is a good match for a dog.

Not every child with autism can be successfully paired with a service or companion dog—for example, children who are afraid of dogs or whose uncontrolled actions may harm a dog won’t be right; neither will those whose fami-

FIND OUT MORE

- ▶ **Autism Service Dogs of America**
971-285-4547;
www.autismservicedogsofamerica.org.
- ▶ **Blessings Unleashed**
270-678-5908; www.blessingsunleashed.org
- ▶ **Canine Companions for Independence** www.cci.org.
- ▶ **Heeling Autism: A Guiding Eyes for the Blind Service Dog Program** 800-942-0149/
914-243-2228; www.guidingeyes.org;
healingautism@guidingeyes.org.
- ▶ **North Star Foundation** www.northstardogs.com.
- ▶ **Wilderwood Service Dogs** 865-660-0095;
www.wilderwood.org.
- ▶ **R.E.A.D.® (Reading Education Assistance Dogs)** 801-272-3439; www.therapyanimals.org.
- ▶ **The Golden Bridge: A Guide to Assistance Dogs for Children Challenged by Autism or Other Developmental Disabilities**
Perdue University Press, 2006.

lies aren't able to adjust to the needs of a dog, or whose parents expect the dogs to perform magic. As K. Burrows, C. Adams, and S. Milman reported in the *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* in 2008, "There is a tendency for parents, especially those with little experience with dogs, to fall victim to 'Lassie syndrome' and the belief that real dogs are capable of the sorts of things that fictionalized dogs do, that they are capable of reasoning as humans do, and are qualified to babysit children."

FINDING THE RIGHT PROGRAM

Researching autism dog programs can be exhausting, especially for those who are new to dogs, but informed parents are better equipped to make good decisions.

The Burrows study, which examined 10 children and 11 dogs from a program that tethered dogs to children with autism, revealed problems that hadn't been addressed prior to the dogs' placement. Most of these children showed no interest in their dogs during the first six months of the placement—the dogs bonded primarily with one of the parents, and some showed signs of separation anxiety when they were forced to sleep in the child's room at night or when sent to school with the child and without the parent. One dog was returned because it ran after another dog, dragging the child to whom it was tied.

These dogs showed evidence of stress and fatigue, especially when sent to school with children, because of the long hours and lack of downtime. Dogs experienced stress when their child had a tantrum and aggressively struck at the dog. Programs that emphasize family education, give parents realistic expectations, provide extensive training, follow-through, and support, select appropriate dogs for this type of work, prevent their dogs from suffering stress or abuse, and utilize positive rather than punitive training methods are most likely to generate positive results. ◀

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