

A Miracle Dog for Reece

[Maria Elena Baca](#), Star Tribune

It was a Tuesday evening in late March at Glynner's Pub in Rochester, Minn. Brad and Joanie Trahan were settling their family into their usual table when their middle son, Reece, who has severe autism, began to whine and flail his arms.

"Don't bite, Reecey," his dad, Brad, intoned, once again stopping his son from nervously biting himself on his bruised forearms.

During dinner, Reece, nearly 7, kept his father busy. First he darted toward a heaping nacho plate at a nearby table; Brad intercepted him just in time. Later, Reece stacked and unstacked cups, moving Brad's hand to help him with his cup, taking a sip, putting it down, asking for more. Brad patiently did the tasks his son set for him. It looked exhausting.

Service dogs make autistic children safer, can help them interact socially and can reduce some parental stress if families go into the relationship with realistic expectations, said Kristen Burrows, a researcher from the Ontario Veterinary College at the University of Guelph.

Reece's autism was diagnosed in January 2003, three months before his third birthday. He doesn't speak. He wears a diaper. He moves constantly, his hands working beads, phone cords, bouncy balls and other favorite objects. He has a limited ability to interact with people, even his family. His behavior has been unpredictable. Crowds, loud noises and transitions agitate him.

In April, the Trahans again went to Glynner's for dinner -- this time with Pudge. Reece was agitated. He pressed his thumbs up into his earlobes and swayed, whining. He resisted Brad's attempts to reassure him. Brad hooked the tether that Reece wears on his belt to Pudge's vest.

Reece resisted, wrenching at the 5-foot tether and pulling it taut. Pudge lay still as the sphinx, stopping Reece from darting across the restaurant. After a minute, Reece gave up. Then he stepped over his dog to the table and calmly began to sip at a glass of water.

He went on to feed himself and play quietly as his parents chatted over a leisurely dinner. A first.

Miracle dog

On March 31, the Trahans, including Brad's parents, traveled to Minneapolis-St. Paul ... to pick up Brad and the dog.

Both kids leaped into their dad's arms; he staggered up the hall, with a child on each arm while leading a handsome black dog in a purple work vest. Back with his mother, Reece giggled and skipped at the sight of his father, and snuck sidelong glances at the dog.

"Reecey, c'mere, bud," Brad said, taking Reece's hand and pulling him to the reclining Pudge. "You'd better get used to him. You're gonna like him, aren't you?"

Reece giggled.

"Reecey, can you pet Pudge?" Brad urged. "I know you hear me. Pet him."

Reece's hand hovered a moment over the dog's black head, then pulled back. The other family members moved in, patting and cooing over Pudge, who rolled over for a belly scratch.

"You're a miracle dog, aren't you?" remarked Gene Trahan, Brad's father.

After several shy attempts, Reece leaned in and put a hand on Pudge's head for a moment, before snatching it away. Instead, he nudged the dog's paw with his toe and giggled again.

That night in bed, Pudge curled up at Reece's feet. For the first time in nearly seven years, Reece slept the whole night through in his own bed.

Unlike many kids with autism, Reece loves hugs, rough-housing and tickles. He uses gestures to communicate his needs. He is also singularly happy; his giggle could fill a room. Still, Reece's autism has taken a toll on the family. Before Pudge, they rarely went to church as a family, had never taken a family vacation, feared going to unfamiliar places. Brenden and Payton are self-possessed and independent, but Brad and Joanie worry that they've had to grow up too fast.

Over the first couple of weeks, the Trahans acclimated to having a dog in the house, and Pudge slowly got to know his charge. Brad and Joanie noticed small changes in Reece's behavior. He continued to sleep through the night. He was more likely to hang out with the family in the evenings, rather than hole up in Brenden's room with his toys and Barney videos. He started to eat dinner at the table with the family.

On walks around the neighborhood, Brenden and Payton held the handle on Pudge's vest, to help him practice for Reece's first hookup.

The big day would come on a snowy April afternoon when NSD trainer and co-founder Chris Fowler came to inspect Pudge's living conditions, test Brad's training, assess Reece's developing connection to his dog, and finally connect them.

In the driveway, Brad hooked the tether onto the D-ring on Pudge's harness. Brad took the leash and guided Pudge onto the sidewalk. Reece giggled and minced along on his

tiptoes, a picture book in one hand and his white and blue phone coil-cords in the other. Fowler, Brenden and Payton hovered behind. Joanie beamed for a moment from the front door before grabbing her jacket and joining the parade down Colleen Street.

Fowler and Brad called out encouraging words:

"Good boy, Pudge. Good job, Reece, good job."

Pudge halted at the corner. Reece stopped at his side and looked around expectantly. When Brad called "Forward, Pudge," boy and dog continued across the street. Now, Reece seems to look to Pudge for guidance. When they're not together, Reece looks around on the floor for his dog. The biting and the frustration have all but ceased when Pudge is with Reece in public.

"He just seems to know that Pudge is there," said Brad, "and he knows when Pudge goes, he's got to go, too. It's like he and Pudge are communicating that to each other."

Show and tell

On April 17, Brad and Joanie unloaded Reece, Pudge and Payton from the family van and trooped into Rochester's Riverside Elementary School for show-and-tell in Brenden's second-grade classroom.

Brenden stood confidently with his father before a circle of his classmates as Pudge snoozed at his feet and Reece wandered happily around the bright room.

Brenden and Brad answered lots of questions about Pudge, whether he likes to play, how hard he works. A little girl in braids volunteered that her cousin has autism. Another student asked whether Reece can be cured.

A couple of days later, Brenden brought home a classmate's drawing of the dog, and another sheet of paper with "PUDGE" written on it. Reece picked up both sheets off the kitchen table; he carried them all day and took them to bed that night.

Reece still is sleeping all night in his own bed. One recent night at bedtime, Reece unexpectedly threw his arms around Pudge and laid his head on the dog's haunch.

The past weeks haven't been without challenges. Brad was asked to remove Reece from a play the family attended, because other viewers complained about the sound of his beads and giggles. That was demoralizing, Brad said.

Still, the small steps have been undeniable. Late last month, the family went to the Minnesota Capitol for a National Autism Awareness Month rally. It's still a novelty, Brad reflects, that they can feel confident about going into a crowd without fear of Reece darting off or falling apart. Also last month, the family went to church together for Brenden's first communion. Reece sat contentedly through a 90-minute service.

"We do feel that Pudge is bringing him confidence and calmness," Brad said. If all goes well, Pudge may be accompanying Reece to school by January.

As for Brad and Joanie, their hopes for Reece have taken off.

"He's already met some of our expectations," Brad said. "We're more hopeful. And we're not only hopeful. It's going to happen."

Today, Pudge will go with the rest of the Trahan family to mass at Resurrection Catholic Church. On June 10, they'll go to the Metrodome for Autism Awareness Day with the Minnesota Twins.

"Last year we were fearful," Brad reflected. "This year we're going to go with a lot more confidence because Pudge is going to be with us."

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