

Service Dogs for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Benefits, Challenges and Welfare Implications

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This thesis was a qualitative investigation of the benefits, challenges and welfare of service dogs for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families. In depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten families in southwestern Ontario to understand the impact of the service dog on the child with autism and the family, and the impact of service life on the welfare of the dogs. Analysis of the interview data led to three distinctive themes central to the applicability and success of these service dog placements. The triad between parent, autistic child and service dog is a highly dynamic and interactive relationship, influenced by many personal and external factors.

Results indicate that service dogs are valuable additions to parents raising a child with autism, especially in the areas of social acknowledgement, improved child safety and companionship.

Specifically, service dog placement benefits included the following:

- Service dog as a sentinel for improving safety and security for the autistic child, both at home and in public - dog alerts parent if something is wrong
- Gaining freedom – service dog was a crucial assistive tool for parents in public places
- Learning new skills – dog sometimes assisted with helping the child to regulate their walking pace and movement; dog also played large role in facilitating tasks that helped child develop motor skills i.e. learning to open dog food container, filling bowl and serving dog
- Impact on child behavior – parents indicated a variety of changes in the mood and behaviors of their children, including decreased social anxiety, increased calmness, reduction in the number of “meltdowns”, dissipated/defused anger, more manageable bed time routines
- Improved family well being – family able to make day trips/vacations with presence of the dog because child was now safe and assisted with transitional activities such as getting the child in and out of a car, navigating obstacles such as doorways and preventing bolting behaviors
- Facilitating social acknowledgements and autism awareness – presence of dog signals to the public that the child has some challenges; parents are able to use these new social interactions to explain what autism is and the challenges they and their child face when the public approaches them to ask about the service dog
- Shifts family focus to a new “member” of the family, provides an opportunity for companionship between parent and dog, promotes parental personal time to walk and exercise with the dog

These benefits however, are sometimes overshadowed by a number of challenges such as public access issues and the extra work associated with dog ownership that may influence the success of the service dog placement.

Parents did report on some challenging aspects of service dog ownership, including:

- Pioneering for public access rights – public access issues, some negative incidents involving retail or restaurant employees challenging public access rights (stressful for parents hoping to be able to get out more)
- Cultural diversity – challenges integrating the dog into communities with cultures that are frightened or leery of dogs in public (again, makes it difficult for the family to get out)
- Public school system – not a problem for every family given variable rules and approaches at different Ontario school boards, but sometime a challenge to convince the school board/administration of the benefits of allowing the dog into the school or a challenge in convincing other parents in the classroom that the dog would not interrupt learning at school
- Overbearing social acknowledgements – although one of the biggest benefits was positive social interactions, they were reported to become tiresome due to the extra time that was required to explain to strangers what the dog did and what autism is (very draining to parents when constantly approached with questions)
- Extra work – the care and maintenance of the dog requires extra time for grooming, exercise, training, feeding, packing extra water, leashes, service jacket, etc.
- Seasonality of placement – the dogs are placed into homes twice a year, once in November and again in May. Parents in both groups reported that the time of year played a role in the ease of integrating the dog into their home. November parents had the stress of the holidays, cold and wet weather, limited outdoor time, etc. May parents had better weather, the children were home to bond with the dog over the summer, families were able to get out more, etc.

Separate research was also conducted to evaluate any physical stress or behavioral issues that influence the dogs' performance as both a working and companion animal in order to facilitate the placement of autism service dogs with other families.

The integration of a service dog into a home environment is a highly dynamic and interactive process that is comprised of numerous benefits and challenges, and influenced by the relationship between parent, child and service dog. Learning to incorporate any new member into a family takes consistency and patience, components that are even more crucial when the new member is a service dog trained to protect the safety of a child. The success of this unique human-animal relationship, in addition to enhancing the welfare of both the families and service dogs, will hopefully benefit from the results of this and future studies.