

## Service Animals

### Introduction

Having a service animal or pet has many benefits for a family, as they offer unconditional love and can have many physical and psychological health benefits. A service animal, such as a dog, might also support your child's social-emotional needs and even help them learn new skills.

### Types of Support Animals and ADA Guidelines

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) allows anyone with a disability that substantially limits one or more life activities to have a service animal. That animal must be trained by a professional to meet the individual's physical or social-emotional needs and can accompany that person in any public setting. Using dogs as an example, there are 3 different categories of animal support, only one of which is considered a service animal.

1. A **Service Dog** is a dog that has been individually trained by a professional to perform a specific task for an individual with a disability of some kind.
2. An **Emotional Support Dog** is a dog that provides comfort and support in forms of affection and companionship for a person who has various mental and emotional needs.
3. A **Therapy Dog** is a dog that is used to bring comfort and joy to those who are ill or under poor conditions, such as a national disaster. Therapy dogs are typically family pets and may be brought by their owners to hospitals or senior living settings.

### Animal Support and Interaction for Individuals with ASD

An "autism service dog" or "autism assistance dog" is specifically for individuals with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. These dogs combine the features of a service animal and an emotional support animal. Their training focuses on needs that are more specific to individuals with autism. They are not considered family pets, but a working service animal placed with your family. If your child has shown interest in animals or you believe they may learn to be comfortable with an animal, the affection and bonding can be a very special experience. While researchers are still studying the benefits of service animals and warn parents to be cautious when considering the range of animal assisted therapies, or a service dog, there appear to be many potential positive outcomes.

### Potential Positive Outcomes

Trainers and families with service dogs have reported at least four potential benefits.

1. An autism service dog may help a child with anxious or disruptive behaviors to regulate their responses and calm themselves. The autism service dog may also reduce anxiety, decrease meltdowns and improve the quality of a child's sleep.
2. An autism service dog can provide a child with socialization opportunities. Children with autism may have limited spontaneous interactions with peers and adults. A service animal may attract other children and even adults who may ask your child questions about the

dog. It may alert others about your child's disability and encourage them to respond with more patience or kindness while interacting with your child.

3. An autism service dog may help to keep your child safe. A service dog can be "another set of eyes" as the dog is aware of your child's location, and may be trained to block your child from wandering outside the house, classroom or playground. Your service dog may be trained to find your child and keep them safe until an adult can reach them.
4. Caring for the animal might support specific skills. For example, following directions such as "Get his bowl" or "Put water in his bowl" can be part of a feeding routine. Using expressive language to tell you 'what comes next' in a routine is another skill you can work on as well as giving the dog verbal commands. Increased motor activity such as running and chasing the dog in the yard might also have positive health benefits.

If your primary goal is companionship for your child, then a well-trained dog with a good temperament may be all that you need, but a service dog will provide this as well.

### The Process for Getting an Autism Service Dog

The basic steps and considerations for getting an autism service dog include the following:

- Your physician must provide a referral based on your child's disability according to ADA rules.
- You then select an agency to assist you in making the decision and start the application process.
- You will need to determine whether you are able to meet the financial requirements to receive and continue to care for the dog in your home. Raising and training a service dog can cost up to \$35,000. Some agencies raise funds to cover the entire cost while others require payment of half or more of the costs.
- The agency will check whether you can meet the training requirements.
- And, finally, the agency will estimate the time it will take to complete the application process, the selection of a dog, the raising of the puppy by the agency in some cases, and the periods of training before your child will receive the service dog, which may take up to 2 years.

### Other Options for Positive Interactions with Animals

Search for Animal Assisted Therapy centers in your community where therapy animals are part of their program. For example, horse or equine, which includes learning how to care for horses, works on motor skills, physical strength, etc. Some groups offer experiences with farm animals.

### Conclusion

While having a service animal has many potential benefits, you should consider the cost and time commitment of caring for an animal. You can speak with your child's therapist to see if they think a service animal will benefit your child. They may also have ideas on how you can include animal therapy in other areas of your child's life. We hope you have found this information useful. You can find additional resources on our website, [www.porchlighteducation.org](http://www.porchlighteducation.org).