

Kids aren't the only one who benefit: Studies show dogs reduce stress for the whole family.



Making a Connection

For children with autism, dogs can be a lifeline between their world and other people. **BY ANDREA PYROS**

When Owen Ashe-Kollar's family first got their dog, Shaggy, 10 years ago, Owen, who is autistic, showed little interest in spending time or helping to care for the goldendoodle. That all changed when Shaggy got his first haircut. "We didn't realize that our designer dog needed to have his hair blown dry," recalls Owen's mother, Kathleen. "When we took him to the groomer, they told us his hair was matted and he would need to be shaved down. Shaggy was pretty traumatized by the experience. That's when Owen stepped in—he could read Shaggy's emotions and knew that he needed some extra love and attention." Owen led the dog into the den to watch TV, closed the door and comforted him. From then on, says Kathleen, he was much more attentive to the dog's needs—and the dog to his.

WORKING DOGS

Dogs have been partners in helping people with a wide variety of disabilities for more than a century.

But increasingly, dogs are finding a role aiding children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), both at home and in therapeutic settings.

"The need for support within this community is both great and urgent," says Erica Stanzione, director of marketing and

in sleeping, eating and social behaviors," says Stanzione.

Researchers are also beginning to study how companion animals might help children with autism. Gretchen Carlisle, Ph.D., of the Research Center for Human Animal Interaction (ReCHAI) at

Autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability in the U.S., with 1 in 59 children diagnosed each year.

development at BluePath Service Dogs, a nonprofit organization that provides families with professionally trained service dogs for children with autism. Dogs can help children with ASD gain important skills; provide safety assistance; and offer pure, unconditional love. "Dogs provide nonjudgmental love and companionship for children with autism. The comfort and company of a well-trained dog can serve as the catalyst for remarkable changes

the University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine and her team surveyed a number of families with autistic children. They found that many of them who had pets in the home reported seeing positive benefits for their children, including learning responsibility through caring for a dog. Other studies, both at ReCHAI and elsewhere, have shown positive benefits in stress reduction, social skills building and more.

AT THEIR SERVICE

It's not just belly rubs and kisses—dogs also play an important role in the safety of children with ASD. Some families say a trained animal can help prevent children who may have a tendency to “bolt” from potentially life-threatening situations, like drowning (the leading cause of death among children 10 years and under with autism). A service dog can alert a parent or caregiver if a child has run off, and some dogs are even trained to block a child from leaving by standing in front of them. Other dogs are trained to give support to a child

in a busy environment by helping guide them through the crowd. And for children who are overwhelmed with sensory stimulation (such as bright lights, loud volumes or crowds) service dogs can help them feel more calm. Simply having a dog in the home can prove helpful, explains Stanzione. “As changes occur in daily life, dogs remain a gentle constant, enabling children to better transition between activities and locations.”

COMMUNITY HELPERS

It's not just the owners at home who benefit from these animals.

Dogs are increasingly being used in school and therapeutic settings. At the Anderson Center for Autism in Staatsburg, New York, specially trained dogs and their handlers work with students on a range of skills, says Rebecca Stanmyer, a licensed speech-language pathologist for Anderson. For some children, dogs are used to help with making choices. A nonverbal child might use pictures to express whether they want to walk the dog, give the dog a treat or pet the dog. A high-anxiety child may wish to just pet and snuggle with a dog for calming purposes. Others can help a child learn routines and sequencing, such as learning the steps needed to take a dog for a walk.

The dogs can also help to build social skills in other settings. At UCLA's Resnick Neuropsychiatric Hospital, patients with autism can participate in the Pet Animal Connections (PAC) program. Working with the PAC, says Robbie Harris, a certified therapeutic-recreation specialist, patients with moderate to severe autism show a decrease in aggressive behavior; they also tend to smile, laugh and share more and have an improved attention span (especially with animals that perform tricks). Even nonverbal patients tend to smile more—and will sometimes sit with the dog and make direct eye contact with him. Being with these dogs helps to provide the patient with pure joy and excitement while relieving some symptoms, Harris says.

For anyone who has ever cared about an animal, it's no surprise to see that the unconditional love dogs provide is a huge part of the appeal. “The children are not being judged about their skills, they are not self-conscious [around their pet], they are not worried about the other person,” says Carlisle.

“Dogs love attention, and they give it right back,” Stanmyer adds, “So if you're petting a dog, the dog wags its tail and the dog is happy—and the child is happy.” 🐾

RESOURCES

Getting Help

Thinking about getting a dog for your family? There are a few things to keep in mind before you look for a pet. Start with the following:

Look for a Reputable Agency

“Watch out for places that have no credentials or are too quick to take your money without a proper evaluation of your needs,” notes Brandi T. Hunter, vice president of public relations and communication for the American Kennel Club.

Consider the Cost The process of finding, training and paying for a dog can be years-long, difficult (there's a high burnout rate of the animals) and, often, expensive. The AKC says it can cost up to \$25,000 for a trained animal from an organization; owner-trained service animals can be just as much, when you factor in costs for professional trainers and pet care.

Know Your Family Families thinking about getting a pet should weigh their own lifestyle and needs, says Gretchen Carlisle,

Ph.D. “Consider the type of pet that they can manage and their specific child. If their child doesn't like dogs, maybe the answer is to get another animal, like a guinea pig or a cat. It's very important to select an animal that is a good match for the whole family.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Assistance Dogs International

A worldwide coalition of nonprofit programs that train and place assistance dogs. assistedogsinternational.org

ADA

Information on the Americans with Disabilities Act and on service animals. ada.gov

American Kennel Club

AKC provides information on dog ownership, including health and training. akc.org

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) show more typical social communication and fewer feelings of isolation when they interact with dogs.



According to one study, 94 percent of autistic kids with a dog bonded with their pet.