

PFA Tips

Therapy and Service Dogs

As the prevalence of autism increases, so do the number of treatments and therapies. One therapy that has been growing in popularity since the late '90s is the use of service and therapy dogs to assist individuals with autism. Dogs have shown to be effective in helping with safety, socialization, soothing meltdowns, alerting to oncoming seizures and helping teach responsibility. But is a dog the best choice for your family?

Is a service/therapy dog a wise choice to explore for your family?

Before making the absolute decision to invest in a service/therapy dog, you need to ask the following questions not only for the individual with autism, but for the family as a whole.

- Is anyone in the family afraid of or uncomfortable around dogs?
- Does anyone in the family have an animal allergy?
- Are you prepared to take on the responsibilities of dog ownership - the day-to-day care, as well as medical and financial obligations?
- Can you commit to the ongoing training regimen?
- Are you willing to be assertive and tell people they may not pet your dog because he is working?
- Are you prepared to take a dog with you everywhere?

What is the difference between a service dog, therapy dog, emotional support dog, and companion dog?

Service dogs are highly trained and are certified to assist its handler with specific tasks related to that person's disability. Therapy dogs are trained to perform more broad tasks for many people typically other than the handler. Therapy dogs might visit medical facilities, disaster areas or schools to help with such activities as physical, occupational, or psychological therapy. Emotional support animals do not require special training and provide comfort to people with depression, anxiety or certain phobias. Emotional support animals need training but not to the extent of a service

dog. To have or to train an emotional support dog, you must have a proper diagnosis from your doctor. An emotional support animal does have accessibility on planes and in some rental housing cases but not in places that are not pet friendly (like a restaurant). Emotional support animals need to be polite in public areas and in the home. (For example, you could not have an emotional support animal that is given special permission for housing and that barks while you are away or who is aggressive or overly shy of other people and/or animals.) Companion dogs are essentially family dogs who provide unconditional love and can be a calming influence. Only service dogs are protected under the ADA to be allowed in places where animals are not permitted. Individuals should seek the advice of a lawyer for the appropriate legal stipulations of a service animal in their state.

What assistance can a service/therapy dog provide to an individual with autism?

Tethering and tracking for wandering and elopement

Using a special tethering harness, a dog can be tethered to a beltloop or harness worn by the person with autism. If the dog is properly trained, it can prevent the person from running off. In some cases, the person is so focused on the dog, that they do not notice distractions which may typically trigger an elopement episode. Some experts discourage this strategy by pointing out that the dog could become distracted and take



off after another animal or become fatigued and not effectively prevent the elopement. As an alternative option, the dog could have two leashes, one for the child and one for the handler who knows how to command the dog.

Tracking is the search and rescue phase when a person has gone missing. Unlike typical search and rescue dogs, service dogs that are trained to track are only taught to locate the individual they work for.

Regardless how well a service dog is trained, we encourage families to implement multiple strategies when dealing with wandering and elopement. For more information, please read "PFA Tips: When They Wander or Run Away" at <https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/safety/pfa-tips-when-they-wander-or-run-away/>.

Interrupting a behavior

If the individual is participating in a repetitive and undesired behavior, the dog can be taught to physically touch the person. This causes a distraction which may stop the behavior. Individuals may engage in a stimming behavior as a coping mechanism

continued on page 2



when anxious. The calming effect the dog can have on the person may result in the person halting the behavior. If the person is engaging in a behavior that could be self-injurious, the dog can place itself between the person and the source of harm.

Seizure prediction

Service dogs can be taught to predict an oncoming seizure as well as help protect the person from harm (for instance, moving between the person and a hard surface) during a seizure. The first step is to train the dog to alert to a symptom. Some dogs with a special bond with their owners are able to see things that we cannot and pre-alert accordingly, while others can only alert to the symptoms taught (like a twitch or falling on the ground).

Calming meltdowns

If the person is experiencing a meltdown, the dog can be trained to lay across the person's lap, creating deep pressure which can be soothing. Sometimes just the dog's calming presence, or gently stroking the dog's fur can relieve the stress experienced during a meltdown.

Improve social interactions

Since many people are drawn to dogs, the dog can serve as a social bridge between the person and their peers. The dog presents a common topic that the individual and their peers can talk about. Social interaction can be improved over time with this type of repeated conversation. Dogs can also help teach individuals to learn to read emotions in others. While it may be easier to interpret the actions of a wagging tail, a yelp, or a playful downward dog position than the subtle expressions made by a person, this can serve as building blocks to deciphering human expression of emotion.

Teach daily living activities

There are responsibilities that come with owning a dog - brushing its fur, feeding it, taking it for walks, giving it baths, etc. Many of the same daily self-care tasks we do for ourselves. Participating in the care of the dog can help the individual learn those skillsets for himself.

What is the average cost of a service dog?

On average, the cost to purchase a service dog is \$16,000. However, fees differ from agency to agency, and fees are covered in a variety of ways. Some agencies fundraise to cover all, or a portion of the fees required from the recipient. Some require the recipient to cover the full costs, while others offer fundraising tools.

Does insurance cover the cost of a service dog?

No. However, you may claim some of the expenses of the service dog on your taxes. Note: you may not deduct expenses for a therapy dog. Please consult a tax professional for more information.

How do I know which agency to use to obtain a service dog?

You want to choose an agency that is accredited by Assistance Dogs International.

How long does it take to get a service dog?

The timeframe can vary from agency to agency, but the average time is two years.

Additional Resources

Assistance Dogs International

<https://assistancedogsinternational.org/>

Assistance Dog United Campaign

<http://www.assistancedogunitedcampaign.org/programlist.html>

Pathfinders for Autism online provider database

<https://pathfindersforautism.org/providers-services/> and choose the category Therapy and Companion Dogs

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<http://www.takingthelead.org/>

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