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Companion Dogs for Autistic Kids

By Lisa Smith, eHow Contributor



Autism is a disabling developmental disorder diagnosed in children that interferes with their ability to communicate, relate to others, control their behavior and emotions and process social cues. Some children engage in repetitive motions or harm themselves. They are characteristically poor at making friends and forming social bonds. Service dogs are a valuable tool in helping these children function in school and at home and to outgrow some of their difficulties. The dog's presence helps the child modify her feelings and aggressive behavior and enables parents to take their child on outings with less fear they will run away or act out.

Acquiring Service Dogs

Autism service dogs cost \$5,000 to \$15,000 to train and acquire, reports ABC News, and are available from 4 Paws for Ability, Project Chance and other organizations. The most common breeds for this role are golden retrievers and Labrador retrievers, also the most commonly used guide dogs for the blind.

Search and Rescue

Autistic children often get themselves into dangerous situations by wandering away or breaking free of a parent's handhold. Service dogs are also search-and-rescue animals. They receive special training to find children who have run

away, which is a common behavior in autism. They are taught how to follow the scent and to search for a lost child, relieving parents' fears and duties, allowing the family more freedom of movement and keeping the child safer.

Emotional Bonding

Dogs connect with autistic children in a special way that often soothes their nerves, calms them down and gives them a feeling of safety and security in their environment. The animals are trained to recognize situations in which a child needs to process sensory information but is unable to do so because it is overwhelming. A trained dog can lean against or touch the child, defusing some of the child's repetitive movements (e.g., flapping hands), thereby moderating the child's emotions.

Social Interaction

Service dogs become a bridge to the outside world and to others for many autistic children. The dog's presence encourages the autistic child to introduce other children to his companion. Conversely, other children are more likely to approach the child and her canine friend. Most importantly, the dog's constant presence and love help teach an autistic child empathy. Unfortunately, several school districts have tried to ban the dogs, leading to court cases that will decide whether they are essential service animals or merely comforting companions, reports MSNBC. Advocacy groups assert that the guide dogs should be protected under the federal Americans with Disabilities Act.

Resources

- [Autism Service Dogs of America](#)
- [Service Dog Central: Autism Service Dogs](#)
- [AspieWeb](#)
- [Project Chance](#)