

Includes:

High-functioning

Anxiety

Aggression

Covers:

School

Meltdowns

Companionship

Family Dog Success Story

Paula, Josh and Lucy

“The Family Dog workshops gave us the confidence to get a dog and the difference she’s made is incredible.”

Paula Czarnecki (61) from Grantham in Lincolnshire lives with her husband and her 18-year old grandson, Josh, who has autism with high anxiety.

“The severity of Josh’s autism meant that he wasn’t able to settle or live at home with his mum and two brothers,” explains Paula. “So, when he was six, he came to live with us.”

Josh is high-functioning and this can be confusing for people to understand. “Until he was clinically assessed, people expected much more of him than he could actually deliver,” explains Paula. “It made him so upset that at times, he could become very angry and violent.”

His first clinical psychology test revealed that while Josh was indeed high-functioning, his processing ability was at the bottom of the graph. “I cried and cried,” says Paula. “That test revealed so much and while it was a huge blow, we were finally



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able to start explaining to people that while Josh was really bright, it takes him longer to absorb and process the information he's given."

Prior to having his psychological test, Josh's experience of school had been broadly negative. "It was stressful mentally and physically," says Paula. So the decision was made for Josh to start attending an SEN school in Grantham.

"Josh became much happier at school," says Paula. "He still had meltdowns but they weren't as frequent and the intensity reduced."

However, because Josh can't talk about how he's feeling he had no friends and Paula was worried about him missing out on peer relationships. "He was so lonely and we felt that he needed someone or something in his life that wouldn't judge or challenge him."

When Josh was little, Paula had overheard someone in a café talking about Dogs for Good's Family Dog service but while she was interested, she initially dismissed it. "I felt that Josh's aggression would make having a dog unsafe for all concerned," she explains.

But as Josh got older and his meltdowns decreased, Paula remembered about Dogs for Good and decided to investigate a little further and see what the Family Dog service might be able to offer. "I was still worried about Josh's aggression but started talking to friends who had dogs and visiting them with Josh. He was absolutely lovely with them and said that he'd really like a dog."

Paula talked to her husband about the idea. "He wasn't keen but I knew all I needed to do was work on him a bit and he'd come round," laughs Paula.

After much discussion and research, the family decided on a Cockapoo and found a local breeder. They went to see a litter of pups – all adorable – and Josh sat down with all of them. "His eyes lit up," recalls Paula. "And there was one, with apricot coloured ears, that came and sat on his lap. Josh said 'I'd like this dog' and that was it!"



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Paula and Josh agreed that in order to fund the cost of the dog – which Josh had named Lucy – he would do some fundraising. “He said he’d do a sponsored bike ride with his grandad and for a child with sensory issues, having the wind in his face, wearing a helmet and multitasking by riding on different surfaces was all really challenging but he never gave up. He wanted his Lucy and, such was his love for her that he was prepared to push himself to extraordinary lengths to make it happen. Having her in his life was enormously important to him.”

The bike ride sponsorship money was added to the proceeds of a craft and bake stall and the total amount raised was £500; enough for Josh to pay for his Lucy. And once Lucy had joined the family, Paula booked herself on a Family Dog Service series of workshops that were being run locally to her.

“After the first workshop which covered what to expect from your dog, how to get a child involved in looking after a dog, developing the child-dog bond and other things, I went home feeling uplifted and excited,” recalls Paula.

Workshop Two focuses on how dogs communicate with us, how a dog can help a family, how dogs learn and how to problem solve effectively. “It was absolutely fascinating and also really useful to help us manage all of our expectations for Lucy,” says Paula.

Workshop Three covers how to set up a training session with your dog and explains the different styles of training families can use that best fit in with their own lives and that of the dog.

“The whole thing was fantastic and was absolutely the best thing I could do for both Lucy and Josh. After the workshops had finished, we were encouraged to get in touch with the trainers at any time for further support and guidance. It goes beyond being just a service; you are welcomed into a very supportive community.”

Six years later and Paula’s never looked back. “Josh and Lucy grew up – and grew naughty – together,” she laughs.



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According to Paula, the most important thing about Lucy is that Josh has that non-judgemental and nonchallenging friend. “He talks to Lucy about anything and everything and she just sits there with him, listening and loving him. It’s so powerful.

The severity of Josh’s meltdowns has decreased and Lucy has an innate ability to sense them coming on way before Paula or her husband see anything. “As soon as she ‘tells’ us, we remove her from the room to keep her safe. While Josh would never do anything to hurt her, none of us want her to be frightened. Josh accepts, understands and supports that.”

The aftermath of Josh’s meltdowns has also been brought down. “Once Josh is calm, Lucy trots back into the room and lays her body on him and starts gently licking him. He responds very positively to that pressure and love and as a result, it takes him far less time to recover himself.”

It’s clear that one little dog has made an enormous impact on Josh. “Lucy is amazing and the difference she’s made is incredible,” says Paula. “I can’t imagine what lockdown would have been like without her to keep us all amused, entertained and loved. The Family Dog workshops gave me so much confidence about how to look after Lucy and train her to help Josh. I’d encourage anyone who’s thinking of getting a dog to help.”



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