

Includes:

High-functioning

Anxiety

Aggression

Covers:

School

Meltdowns

Companionship

Family Dog Success Story

Jo, Theo and Oakley

“Right from the moment he entered our lives, Oakley made a positive difference to Theo. He’s my absolute little star.”

Jo Smith (41) from Chippenham in Wiltshire is mum to two sons and her youngest, Theo (11), has autism and ADD. “Theo is high-functioning and he really struggles with his mental health. His darkest moods take him to places that no parent wants to find their beloved child.”

Like most parents of a child with autism, Jo found herself searching online for services and therapies that might help Theo. “I’d heard about autism assistance dogs but felt that Theo’s diagnosis meant that he wouldn’t qualify for one,” she explains. “But, having had a dog myself as a child I felt sure that it would be a positive influence. So, when I found out about Dogs for Good’s Family Dog service, I thought that it could be really helpful.”

Jo booked herself onto a local course and right from the start, knew that she’d made the right choice. “Everyone was in the same boat as me and it was lovely to be part of a group of people looking for the same kind of help. The instructors were immensely



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knowledgeable and because the group was small, one-to-one help was easily achievable. I learned so much about choosing the right breed, how to understand dog behaviour and ensure that their needs are met and how to go about training a dog in the right way. Even after the first workshop, I started to feel confident enough to start the search for a companion dog for our family.”

Jo decided to get a puppy and after careful consideration, felt sure that a Labrador would be the best choice for her family. “I knew that getting a puppy would be a lot of hard work but I knew that I wouldn’t be in it alone because of the post-workshop support that Dogs for Good’s Family Dog team offer on the phone and online. That was really reassuring.”

Jo found a breeder locally who sent her some photos of the litter so she could show them to the family before going to see the pups. “Of course, they were all adorable... but there was something about one of them,” she says. “We were all really drawn to him.”

Needless to say, Jo instincts were correct and as soon as he was old enough to leave his mum, a little yellow Labrador puppy joined their family. They named him ‘Oakley’. “The workshops taught me not to expect too much of Oakley as puppies aren’t hugely trainable until they’re much older,” says Jo. “But one thing did happen, right from day one. Oakley became Theo’s best friend and just that simple thing started a hugely positive change for Theo.”

School was something that Theo didn’t enjoy but Oakley helped make that less upsetting by just being part of Theo’s life. “Even though Oakley wasn’t able to go to school with Theo, the school were amazing and and got involved with helping Theo share Oakley with his classmates through visuals,” says Jo. “This helped the other children see Theo differently. It also helped Theo’s relationships with his teachers,” says Jo.

Previously, when Theo came home from school, he would go straight out onto his trampoline to bounce and gain some relief from the sensory overload he’d



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experienced during his school day. “That changed immediately, too,” recalls Jo. “As soon as Theo came through the door, he’d seek out Oakley for cuddles, strokes and laughs. It was absolutely magical to see Theo’s anxiety, stress and unhappiness melt away through his interaction with Oakley.”

After a few months and as he got bigger, Oakley also showed a natural inclination to ‘body rest’; where a dog will lay the weight of its body over a person which gives a comforting sensation of deep pressure. “It’s something that children with autism find incredibly soothing so Theo is a big fan,” explains Jo. “But Oakley will also do it to any one of us if he senses we’re upset about something. His lovely, calm presence is so relaxing.”

Oakley is now two years old – an impossibly handsome, leggy, 31kg package of joy who Jo describes as “my absolute little star.”

Since coming into the family, Theo’s moods have stabilised and the love he and Oakley have for each other is unconditional.

And now that Oakley’s old enough to teach, the techniques that Jo learned in the Family Dog workshops are starting to come together.

“We’re starting to refine the body rest a bit and also teach him just to use his head – a technique called a ‘head rest’ which we learned in the workshops,” Jo explains. She is also teaching Oakley to use ‘talking buttons’ – another method that the Family Dog workshops teach. “The buttons are devices that you can record a single message on,” explains Jo. “They’re big enough for a dog to either place a paw or a nose on to set it off.

Jo says she’s likely to use the buttons for ‘transitions’ – for example, letting Theo know when it’s time to end screen time, bed time, homework time and helping him to choose which homework to do. “Theo wants to help train Oakley to do this which will, I’m sure, strengthen their bond even more,” she says.



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Lockdown is hard for everyone but especially for families with a child with autism. Jo says that now, more than ever, Oakley has made everything so much easier to bear. “Lockdown would have been so much harder without him,” she says.

The whole family agree, saying: “He provides us with unconditional love and entertainment every day; he’s so loveable and playful. He helps to relieve stress and tension and is a great distraction. He always knows if you’re having a bad day and is always there for you.”

Theo adds: “Oakley makes us all laugh and he makes me very happy. I love the funny dance he does when we give him a treat! Oakley is my best friend and I hope Oakley knows this. I hope I am also Oakley's best friend.”



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