

DOGS FOR THE DISABLED PAWS (Parents Autism Workshops and Support) PROJECT INFORMATION

DOGS FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Studies show that dogs have a profoundly positive effect on children with autism and can help the child to develop skills that increase independence and quality of life. A study carried out in 1989 found that dogs can have a strong impact on children with autism and that social interactions increase during the presence of a dog. It also found that these children showed fewer autistic behaviours and more socially appropriate ones when a dog was introduced during therapy sessions¹. Results of a study by the Washington State University in 2002 showed that children exhibited a more playful mood, were more focused and were more aware of their social environments when in the presence of a calm dog². A recent Canadian study concluded that the presence of an assistance dog within the family unit of a child with autism resulted in decreased anxiety, increased calmness, a reduction in the number of tantrums and more manageable bedtime routines for that child³.

Spurred on by such positive findings, Dogs for the Disabled, with the backing and encouragement of the National Autistic Society, launched a pilot programme in 2008 to place specially trained assistance dogs with children with autism. To date, eight assistance dogs have been provided under this scheme with the aim of increasing this to 12 by the end of 2009 and 25 by 2010. The progress made to date by the recipients of the dogs has been astounding, each showing a calmer disposition, better attempts at communication and a generally happier demeanour.

Since the launch of the Autism Assistance Dog Programme, Dogs for the Disabled has received many calls each week from the parents of children with autism, wanting to find out how a dog could help their child. In order to meet this demand, Dogs for the Disabled, with help and guidance from the National Autistic Society, is launching the PAWS Project, the first of their kind in the world. The service aims to provide parents with the knowledge and support required to source a suitable pet dog or to help train their existing dog to assist in positively shaping their child's behaviour and social / cognitive development.

PAWS PROJECT

The aim of the service is to provide parents with practical support and information through the provision of workshops, educational materials, website pages and a telephone advice line as well as to set up a network for parents across the UK. The workshop team requires the support of three members of staff; the PAWS Team Leader, PAWS Dog Technician and the PAWS Project Administrator. Parents attend a series of three workshops run by the PAWS Team Leader and PAWS Dog Technician at locations across the UK, supported by the PAWS Administrator based at the centre in Banbury, Oxfordshire.

Each workshop will last one day and they will be spaced approximately one month apart. Workshops will be open to one or both parents / carers of the child. They will cover the following topics:

- WORKSHOP 1 – An introduction to the way in which a pet dog might offer benefits to a child with autism, as well as the practicalities of selecting the right dog for the child (breed, age, etc.).
- WORKSHOP 2 – Focusing on the training of a family dog to work effectively around the child.
- WORKSHOP 3 – Working with each parent on the individual needs of their children. Utilising case studies, role play, video and some hands-on dog training.

During the workshops, parents will be encouraged to think about ways in which they feel a dog might assist in developing their child's responsibility or general behaviour. For example, the dog might be trained to distract the child from engaging in repetitive behaviours by performing an entertaining trick such as rolling onto their back. Alternatively, the parent may wish to use the dog as a reasoning tool to the child, making comparisons between the dog having to sit quietly before being allowed to eat its dinner and the child doing the same. Working together with the project workers, parents will create a short list of objectives which they will then be encouraged to follow and develop, once they acquire their new dog.

Following the workshops, the Project Worker – Child development and the Project Worker – Dog Training and Welfare will offer support via a telephone support service, an online facility and paper-based information. They will also assist the parents in finding appropriate local dog training opportunities, via a professional dog trainer or Kennel Club approved dog training club, in order to ensure on-going assistance with any dog training requirements. Over time, a family network will be established, where parents will be encouraged to share ideas and good practice.

ATTENDEES AND SELECTION

The support service is open to attendees throughout the UK who have one or more children with a clinical diagnosis, or who are showing signs, of autism. Many of these are likely to be families which have approached Dogs for the Disabled with regards to having an assistance dog but who have decided that a trained pet dog is actually more suitable for their requirements. Other families will be referred to the service via the National Autistic Society which will add it to their list of resources for parents wanting to explore alternatives that might assist their child with autism. Local authority and healthcare staff will also be made aware of the service's development and it is likely that this will create a new stream of enquiries. Finally, there is the opportunity to publicise the service in the future, but this will only be done following careful consideration regarding a possible influx of enquiries and applications from potential attendees.

BENEFITS

Families comprising children with autism often experience difficulties with all aspects of everyday life. Introducing a dog into the family has wide-ranging benefits for all concerned:

- A constant source of companionship for the child
- An understanding of the needs of other individuals, using the dog as a learning tool
- A calmer child with an increased attention span and aptitude for learning

- Improvement in the child's behaviour, communication and social skills
- A positive focus for the family allowing them to experience more quality time as a unit
- Increased independence and reduced anxiety for the child.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The service will be subject to a rigorous research programme to evaluate its value and effectiveness and all parents taking part will be asked to contribute to this study. The research, which will be undertaken by a separate research team will be co-ordinated by Dogs for the Disabled but will include research teams from Research Autism (Dr Richard Mills) and the Department of Biological Sciences at Lincoln University (Prof. Daniel Mills). Findings from this study will be widely disseminated to all interested parties. Funding for the research study has been obtained from the Big Lottery Fund and will start in July 2010.

MANAGEMENT OF THE PROJECT

The overall management of the PAWS project will be undertaken by Helen McCain, Director of Training at Dogs for the Disabled, although one of the appointed Project Workers will act as Team Leader and manage the project day-to-day.

CASE STUDY



Kristina has two sons, Gabe aged eight and Jude aged four. Jude has autism and Kristina was invited to attend a series of pilot workshops in Summer 2009. The family also share their lives with Claude, a black Labrador who was six months old at the time of the workshops.

"For me, the benefit of attending the training course was to see that with the right training, the sky really is the limit in terms of what we can do with our dogs. I was blown away by the methods they use to train their dogs and could see how easily I could use these techniques with Claude".

Since attending the workshops, Kristina has been developing Claude's training so that now he can gently touch his nose to a child's hand to help interrupt a tantrum. The family are currently working on their 'head on lap' technique where Claude will gently place his head on a child's lap for a stroke.

If Jude now has a tantrum, Claude will stay in the room with him, just being there as a reassuring presence. Kristina has also developed a two-strand lead so that Jude can help to walk Claude in the park nearby. It gives Kristina the control of the dog, but also creates an opportunity for Jude to take part in the walk and to focus on walking in the same direction as the rest of the family.

"For us, getting Claude has been the best thing we've done for our family. It has not been without problems but I believe that there is a special magic between dogs and children with autism – dogs seem to know that these kids are a little bit different. For Jude, relationships are complex and confusing but Claude's patience, loyalty and playfulness have given Jude a constant and very much loved companion."

REFERENCES

1. Redefer, L., Goodman, J.F. (1989). Brief Report: Pet-facilitated therapy with autistic children. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 19(3), 461-467.
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3. Burrows, K., Adams, C., Spiers, J. (2008). Sentinels of Safety: Service Dogs Ensure Safety and Enhance Freedom and Well-Being for Families with Autistic Children. *Qualitative Health Research*, 18(12), 1642-1649