

# Pet power!



difference, like going for a walk together as a family.”

Teaming up with the National Autistic Society and the University of Lincoln, the charity embarked on a three-year research project, investigating how dogs affect children with autism, and their impact on the family as a whole. The results not only supported the theory that pet dogs can have a positive effect on the children, but also highlighted their ability to reduce parents’ stress levels – a win-win situation if ever there was one!

### WORKSHOP MILESTONE

“The project turned into the service we now offer,” Duncan says. “Parents attend three one-day workshops, one month apart. We start with the basics of how to choose a puppy or dog and safely integrate it into the family, right through to teaching dogs easy tricks, which can help in a variety of ways.”

Today’s session is the last of the three, and represents something of a milestone for the charity as it’s the 100th time the team have rolled out this series of workshops. With a wealth of success stories behind them, Duncan tells me the plan is to increase the number



of workshops on offer in more locations. “We were able to help 120 people in 2016 and hope to double that figure in 2017, without compromising the quality of the training or becoming less personal in our approach.”

Some of the parents around me have already taken the plunge and introduced a puppy to their families. Others have their names down with a breeder or rescue centre, while some parents are still at the planning stage. One mum tells the group they’ve put more

thought into getting a dog than they ever gave to having children!

Laura Osborne has three young children. The youngest, five-year-old Sonny, was diagnosed with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) about 18 months ago, and she tells us that well-meaning family and friends warned taking on a puppy would be too much. It looked as if Laura and her husband David had quite enough on their plate, but Laura can think of nothing negative to say about life since the arrival of Arlo,

## Specially trained accredited assistance dogs do amazing work, but pet dogs can change lives too, as DEBBIE BRIDGES finds out at a PAWS Family Dog workshop

If proof were needed that dogs are wonderful creatures, there’s no shortage of it in the bright and cheery community hall on the outskirts of Milton Keynes, where I’ve come to see what goes on at a PAWS Family Dog workshop. Aimed at parents of children with autism, the scheme is run by Dogs for Good (formerly Dogs for the Disabled), a UK-based charity that trains and provides accredited assistance dogs to people with physical disabilities and children with autism.

Training assistance dogs, however, is both time-consuming and costly, leading to dishearteningly long waiting lists. Some 10 years ago, Dogs for Good decided to tackle the

problem and, casting about for ways to get help more quickly to a greater number of people, hit on an entirely new approach.

“We realised many children with autism didn’t need an assistance dog,” says Duncan Edwards, PAWS Family Dog team

leader. “Just having a pet dog in the home can be incredibly beneficial, by providing an alternative focus and giving parents the opportunity to have a different relationship with their children because of the dog. Simple things can make a huge

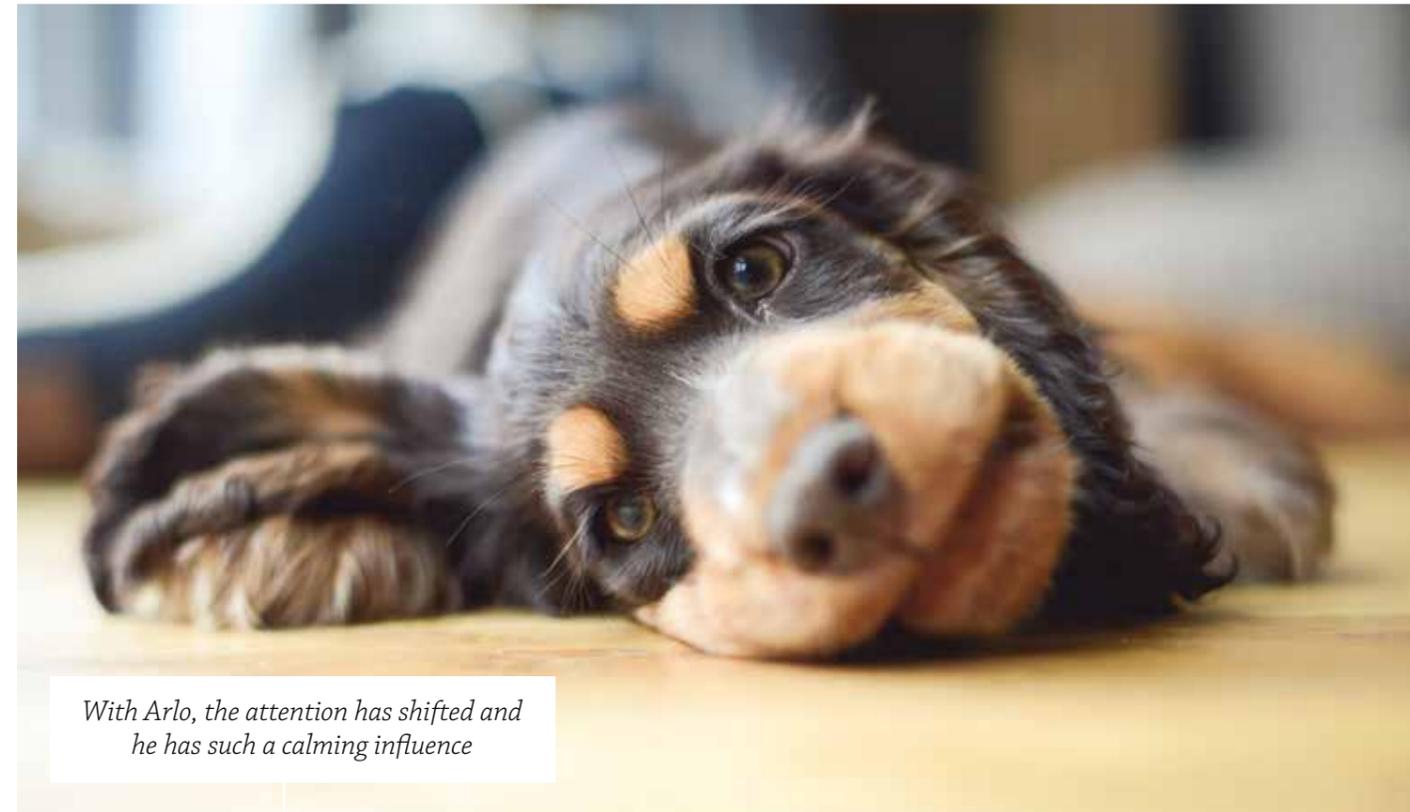
**Above: The Osborne family with their little life changer Arlo.**

**Below left: The PAWS team with workshop participants.**

**Opposite above and below, Cocker Spaniel Arlo relaxes.**



PHOTO © DEBBIE BRIDGES



*With Arlo, the attention has shifted and he has such a calming influence*

their Cocker Spaniel pup. Yes, it's hard work, but Laura feels the effort involved is far outweighed by the joy and laughter Arlo has brought into their lives.

"Getting Arlo is one of the best decisions we've ever made," says Laura. "He's a life changer. Our house was incredibly stressful. All our focus and attention was on our son, and we'd tell the girls not to do certain things because it would upset him. We tiptoed around him and never went out. With Arlo, the attention has shifted and he has such a calming influence. We no longer fuss over Sonny, and we have a purpose in going out and taking Arlo with us."

Laura works from home and says her daily walks are an added bonus. She's joined a local puppy class, and when Arlo is old enough, plans to teach him some of the tricks the team will be talking about today. Top of her list is the nose nudge, which does exactly what it says on the tin, and can be used to interrupt repetitive behaviour patterns or avoid meltdowns.

As the session gets underway, it becomes clear that building relationships with dogs and understanding their needs forms the core of the charity's training package. Reading canine body



**Above: Trainer Robbie Campbell and Siren share a strong bond.**

**Below left: Toby and Rupert the Pug share a cuddle.**

**Below: Toby and Rupert in their matching football shirts.**

language and reward-based training methods are discussed, and even the more experienced dog-owners present, like Penny Tansley, are finding food for thought in the subjects covered.

"I've learned a lot in these workshops," says Penny. "And I've had dogs all my life!"

There were already two dogs in Penny's household when she

decided to find a puppy for her son, Toby. Lovely though her two Border Terriers are, she says they didn't really have the calm temperament necessary, and choosing Pug puppy Rupert as a companion for Toby has made a phenomenal difference, especially to their morning routine.

"Getting Toby up in the mornings was difficult," Penny



PHOTOS © DEBBIE BRIDGES

**Above: Siren demonstrates the early stages of button push training.**

**Above right: Siren then shows us the button push.**

**Right: Trainer Kate Steel and 18 month old crossbreed Fidget.**

says. "Now, Rupert launches himself onto the bed and digs him out, which makes for a much happier start to Toby's day."

#### DEMO DOGS

While we've been talking, two members of the PAWS Family Dog team have been busy snoozing, playing and taking more than a passing interest in the coffee time biscuits. Demonstration dogs Siren and Fidget are here to help show us how pet dogs can be taught those little tricks that can make such a big difference.

The human/dog bond that the charity feels is key to successful training is very much in evidence, and it's hard to believe that Siren and Fidget don't live full-time with their trainers, Robbie Campbell and Katie Steel. PAWS currently has three demo dogs who live as pets in the homes of volunteer boarders, trotting off two or three times a week to head office in Banbury to hone their skills.

Fidget, a crossbreed, is only 18 months old, and came to the charity from Battersea Dogs and Cats Home. He and Katie demonstrate the finer points of clicker training before making way for senior dog Siren the Labrador, who works alongside Robbie, and gives us a taste of the more advanced stuff.



Starting with a black cross painted on a board, the pair guide us through various stages leading up to the button push. This involves the dog using a paw to press a large button that then 'speaks' whatever phrase you've pre-recorded onto it, such as 'Let's go for a walk!'

"You could have more than one button, and put different messages on each one," says Robbie, before explaining that a similar technique can be used

for teaching dogs to appear to choose something with the touch of their paw, like bedtime stories, clothing, and so on.

Everyone is excited by the potential of the tactics we've seen demonstrated, but the new dog owners are unanimous in their belief that just bringing a dog into their home has already made a massive improvement in their lives.

Lucy Norton says she's delighted by the sight of her





*Looking to the future, the charity hopes to add two voluntary assisting roles by recruiting canine behaviourists to advise on training, and parents to offer peer support*

10-year-old son, Kai, playing in the garden with Rosie, their Cockapoo puppy (below).

“Before we had Rosie, Kai didn’t like going in the back garden without me,” she says. “He suffers quite badly with anxiety and Rosie has already helped. Recently, he and Rosie came upstairs together to find me as

they’d ‘both’ got scared. Coming upstairs alone is a huge thing for Kai, and it was Rosie who gave him the strength to do it.”

**ONGOING SUPPORT**  
PAWS exists to help families, but there’s a family feel to the organisation itself and, like a family, they’re ready to help with

any ups and downs that may come.

“Support and advice doesn’t end after the last workshop,” Duncan tells me. “It’s available for as long as it’s needed, and we’re currently in regular contact with around 800 families. On top of that, we have a private Facebook page where people can share their experiences and help each other.”

Looking to the future, Duncan says the charity hopes to add two voluntary assisting roles by recruiting canine behaviourists to advise on training, and parents to offer peer support.

One thing is obvious from the research and the stories parents have to tell – dogs can change lives just by offering their own unique kind of companionship. Many would claim that to know them is to love them, and this has also been confirmed by the three-year study. In a video summing up the findings, Richard Mills, head of research at the National Autistic Society, reveals an unexpected result...

“I’m not really a dog person,” he smiles. “But I’ve come to love them through the course of this project!” 🐾



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**  
**Debbie Bridges is a freelance writer. She lives in Devon where she spends her free time exploring every inch of the countryside in the company of her Romanian rescue dog Ula.**



### Leads to follow

For more information about Dogs for Good and the PAWS Family Dog scheme, go to [www.dogsforgood.org](http://www.dogsforgood.org)