

The Benefits of Assistance Animals

By Melanie Snyder

Mom, can I get a puppy?" may be the most commonly asked question of childhood, but for a child with special needs, the question--and possible answers--can be life changing.

What Is an Assistance Animal?

Animals that are "individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of a person with a disability" can legally be designated assistance animals. The key is that the animal must be trained to perform tasks that are specifically related to the person's disability. Companion animals and pets don't qualify.

There are three categories of assistance animals: guide animals for blind or visually impaired persons, hearing animals for deaf or hard of hearing persons, and service animals for people with other physical or mental disabilities. The term "service animals" is sometimes used generically to apply to all types of assistance animals. In this article, "assistance animals" refers to all types, and "service animals" refers to animals that help people other than those with vision or hearing-related conditions.

Dogs are the most common assistance animals, though miniature horses can be trained as guide animals and monkeys can be trained as service animals. (see Resources)

What Can Assistance Animals Do?

The International Association of Assistance Dog Partners (IAADP) has identified over a hundred tasks that

assistance dogs can be trained to perform. Guide dogs can help avoid obstacles, signal changes in elevation and locate objects on command; Hearing dogs alert their owners to sounds the owner can't hear, including ringing telephones, smoke alarms, doorbells, approaching vehicles, car horns, crying babies and others; Service dogs can retrieve objects, carry objects, deposit objects, perform tugging tasks (opening doors, removing shoes and clothing, dragging heavy items), perform nose nudging or pawing tasks (flipping light switches, nudging a paralyzed arm or leg back onto a wheelchair, closing doors), and provide bracing or mobility assistance (moving a wheelchair, providing support to go up or down stairs, providing balance for standing and walking).

Service dogs can also be trained to assist in a medical crisis by fetching medication, fetching the telephone, calling 911 or other pre-programmed numbers on a K-9 Rescue Phone, answering the door to let emergency personnel in and barking or otherwise summoning help in an emergency. For persons with autism, service dogs can help calm the person, reduce emotional outbursts and provide a positive social link. Service dogs can also be trained to assist people with seizure disorders.

Assistance animals should never be expected or used to monitor or "babysit" a child while a parent or caregiver is occupied. Stories of animals making dramatic rescues when a child has a seizure, takes a fall, or is otherwise at risk are rare exceptions.



Photo courtesy of Helping Hands: Monkey Helpers for the Disabled

Could an Assistance Animal Help My Child?

According to the Delta Society, "Any person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity might be a candidate" for an assistance animal.

Delta Society offers these questions to assess the potential appropriateness of an assistance animal:

- How difficult are activities of daily living?
- Will the person have better stamina if s/he can conserve energy by having the animal perform tasks?
- Would having an assistance animal help the person get more physical exercise or be more mobile?
- Would an animal help socially by being a distraction from the person's disability, or help the person externalize his/her focus of attention?
- Would the animal's presence alleviate some of the safety and well-being concerns of significant others who cannot be with the person all day?
- Would the person eat better if the animal carried the food from the refrigerator, or if they synchronized their meals?

Your child's age is a critical factor. Due to the responsibilities involved in handling and caring for an assistance animal, training organizations that serve children generally have specific minimum age requirements for children receiving assistance animals.

"It is hard to get a dog to respect and work for a child under the age of

eleven as a 'partner,'" says Joan Froling, Chairperson of IAADP. "A parent has to be the primary handler of a dog for a child under age twelve."

Programs that do provide dogs for younger children often require a three-way partnership with the parent, the child and the dog, and will require both parent and child to participate in training. Input from your child's health care and social service providers on the appropriateness of an assistance animal for your child should also be considered when making this decision.

Essential Considerations

Carefully evaluate your child's desire, motivation and ability to care for and manage an assistance animal. Consider the potential impact on your family's lifestyle and daily routines. Allergies may be an important factor in the types of animals you can have in the house. Understand the time that will be required to properly care for and maintain the animal.

"Ask yourself if you would adopt another 3-year-old child right now. If not, don't get a dog. That's the level of commitment you need," advises Linda Jennings, President of Assistance Dogs International (ADI) and owner of Loving Paws Assistance Dogs", an organization dedicated to training assistance dogs for children.

The expenses of obtaining, training and caring for an assistance animal can be substantial. The extensive training required for an assistance animal can cost \$10,000 to \$20,000 or more. Some training organizations cover these expenses through grants and donations, and provide animals at no cost to the recipient. Some organizations charge nominal fees to cover certain expenses, and others charge more substantial fees to help cover the full costs of training.

Explore insurance reimbursement, scholarships, financial assistance from trainers, and grants from civic organizations

(Lions, Rotary, Elks). Associations or foundations focused on your child's diagnosed condition may offer financial help. Some trainers encourage families to hold fundraisers to obtain the necessary funds. Animal shelters, pet shops, veterinarians, dog groomers and rescue organizations may also be willing to help.

It can take two to three years from the time you start investigating the possibility until you have a trained assistance animal in the home, working for your child.

Locating a Trainer or Organization

While there are no mandated standards for assistance animal trainers, ADI has developed their own standards and maintains a registry of trainers who have agreed to adhere to those standards. Delta Society has a database of trainers that can be searched by state. IAADP offers information on assistance dog selection and training, assistance dog laws and legal resources, and lists of assistance dog groups in the U.S. and internationally. (see Resources)

Application, Screening and Matching

Organizations that train assistance animals invest significant time and money in preparing those animals to work and want to ensure that the animals they train will be well utilized.



photo courtesy of
Loving Paws Assistance Dogs

"Some parents won't trust a dog to do the job - they won't let a dog hear for a deaf child or guide a blind child," Jennings observes. "This kind of interference leads the dog to quit working. That's a huge waste of the program's efforts and fundraising to train that dog - a dog that could now be working for another child instead of lying around in someone's home."

Application and screening processes for assistance animals are rigorous. Jennings outlines some of the questions typically asked of families applying for an assistance animal:

- *Expectations: Does the child want the dog or is this the parent's wish? What does the child want from the dog? What does the parent expect the dog to do? Are all family members supportive? Do they understand that the dog is not a pet and they can't interfere with the dog's working for the child?*

- *Finances: What is the family's financial situation? Can they afford good dog food, vet care, occasional trauma costs, toys, equipment?*

- *Environment: How busy is the family? How many children under the age of ten? How many pets? Do they have a fenced yard? Is there space for the dog to get away from rowdy/noisy situations? Will the dog be allowed to sleep indoors?*

Once the organization feels confident that an assistance animal is appropriate for your child, you'll discuss your child's specific condition, temperament and needs, household and daily routines, and specific preferences you may have with regard to breed, longevity, gender, age or size of the animal at maturity. The type of work the animal will need to do will determine the required size of the animal. For example, a small dog could not be expected to perform functions like pulling a wheelchair.

The Training Process

Initial training may take four months to a year--or more. Once the animal has completed initial training, the trainer may bring the animal to your home for a

period of in-home orientation, training and evaluation for compatibility. Other trainers require families to go to their facility for supervised training.

When the Animal Comes Home

The first month is typically a trial period to check for compatibility between the animal and the primary handler. If the animal acts aggressive or menacing in any way, it is time to look for another animal. During training, animals are tested for aggression. However, aggressive traits may develop as the dog ages or in specific situations.

“Once the family has gone through the class and graduated with a dog, it will take approximately one more year for the team to bond and

really begin working well together,” says Jennings. “The family needs to be committed to following through with this process in order to get the most out of the dog.”

Assistance Animals and the Law

Federal law protects the rights of individuals with assistance animals to take their animals into public places, including schools, businesses, public transportation, hotels, restaurants, libraries, museums and others, even if those places otherwise prohibit animals.

If an assistance animal acts aggressively toward people or other animals when in public, however, the law considers that animal improperly trained and the laws governing access no longer apply.

Some state laws offer broader protections and access than federal law. Check with your State Attorney General's office for relevant laws in your state. Some states require assistance animals to have specific attire or equipment, such as a collar, leash, harness, backpack or a red vest, the universal color designating assistance animals.

While assistance animals are not required to be registered, it may be helpful to

carry documentation showing your animal is a trained service animal, especially when traveling, due to heightened security restrictions.

Benefits of Assistance Animals

Assistance animals are not for everyone. However, with careful research, consideration and preparation, an assistance animal can offer your child some functional independence. An assistance animal can reduce the level of human assistance required, which may result in savings in health care and other care-giving costs.

Scientific research has found that assistance animals can offer their handlers improved control over their environment, increased independence, better community integration, greater social acceptance, heightened psychological well-being and increased self esteem. Who knew the simple childhood question, “Mom, can I get a puppy?” could offer such life-changing answers? ■

Melanie G. Snyder has written for over 25 parenting magazines across the US and Canada, children's magazines Cricket, Calliope and Guideposts for Kids, education publishers Harcourt, Scholastic, and SIRS, and others. See her website at: www.MelanieGSnyder.com



photo courtesy of
Guide Horse Foundation

RESOURCES

Professional Organizations

Assistance Dogs International
PO Box 5174 • Santa Rosa, CA 95402
707-571-0427 • www.adionline.org

Delta Society
875 124th Ave NE, Ste 101 • Bellevue, WA 98005-2531
425-679-5500 • www.deltasociety.org

International Association of Assistance Dog Partners
38691 Filly Drive • Sterling Heights, MI 48310
586-826-3938 • National Helpline: 760-439-9544
www.iaadp.org

Specialized Providers

Loving Paws Assistance Dogs
P.O. Box 12005 • Santa Rosa, CA 95406
707-569-7092 • www.lovingpaws.org

Helping Hands: Monkey Helpers for the Disabled
541 Cambridge St • Boston, MA 02134-2023
617-787-4419 • www.monkeyhelpers.org

Guide Horse Foundation
P. O. Box 511 • Kittrell, NC, USA 27544
252-433-4755 • www.guidehorse.org

Autism Service Dogs of America
4248 Galewood St., • Lake Oswego, OR 97035
www.autismservicedogsofamerica.com

Ten Essential Questions to Ask Assistance Animal Trainers

(Note: Check trainers' websites first for answers.)

1. What is required to qualify for an assistance animal? Get qualification criteria in writing. Some may require sensitive medical and/or financial information. Ask for a signed, written guarantee that your private information will not be shared.

2. What ages of children do you work with?

3. What types of assistance animals do you train?

4. What are your credentials, expertise and success rate in placing animals? Ask for references from people with similar needs as your child, if possible.

5. What is the process and timeframe to get an assistance animal?

6. How does the training process work? What will it require of me and my child? Is training individualized to my child's needs? What ongoing training and/or support is provided after placement?

7. What will it cost (application fees, training fees, shipping costs, others)? Is financial assistance available?

8. What certifications and/or guarantees do you offer on animals? How are grievances handled? Get a copy of the contract used by the trainer and have a legal professional review it.

9. Who retains legal ownership of the animal?

10. What are your health and temperament screening processes for animals?

a. Health screening should include elbow, shoulder and hip dysplasia, using Orthopedic Foundation of America (OFA) evaluation criteria; eye disease using Canine Eye Registration Foundation criteria; thyroid, heart, chronic skin and breed-specific diseases; allergies; heartworm, internal and external parasites. Vaccinations should be up to date. Animals should be spayed or neutered.

b. Temperament screening should include tests for aggression, fearfulness, reactions to noise and crowds, body sensitivity (i.e, how they might react if their tail gets stepped on or they get bumped by a wheelchair), obedience, fetch/ retrieve behavior, adaptability to new situations, socialization skills and ability to learn new commands.