

LEARNING CENTER

Is a Therapy Dog Right for Your Child with Autism [Complete Guide]



BY BARRY SHECHTER JANUARY 12, 2021



Table of Contents [[show](#)]

Autism or autism spectrum disorder is a set of conditions with symptoms such as repetitive behaviors, challenges in communication and social skills, sleep disorders and sensory sensitivities. For many children, the signs of autism begin to become apparent by the age of two or three. Sometimes autism developmental delays may lead to an even earlier diagnosis.

There are varying degrees of autism, and while there is no cure, there are many therapies, tools and interventions that may be helpful.

One option families explore is bringing an autism therapy dog into their family. While there can be benefits, a therapy dog may not be the right fit for every child or family.

What is a Therapy Dog?

Sometimes “therapy dog” is used as a blanket term, but there are differences between service dogs and therapy dogs. There is also a third category to be aware of, which is a companion dog.

Therapy Dogs

A therapy dog is trained to provide comfort in a

therapeutic context. Settings you may see therapy dogs include nursing homes, health care and mental health facilities and hospitals. Sometimes a therapy dog can help a patient overcome a stressful or traumatic procedure, or they might help with occupational or physical therapy.

Outside of medical settings or an institutional environment, a therapy dog is an option for people with autism because they can help encourage social interaction as well as being calming.

A lot of therapy dogs have specialized training, but not all.

Certain agencies are accredited to connect people with therapy dogs, such as the Assistance Dogs International organization.

Therapy dogs don't have federally-mandated access to public places, and if you opt for a therapy dog for your child it's important that you take the time to find the right match not only for your child but for your family.

If you work with a specialized agency they can help you do this. When a family does decide to bring in a therapy dog, it can take up to two years to go through the process which often includes home visits and

specialized training.

How a service dog transformed daily life fo...



Companion Dogs

A companion dog is a specially trained pet that can be calming for someone with autism. These dogs are meant to help provide not just a sense of comfort, but they can also help a child with autism get more social interaction and learn the responsibilities that come with caring for the dog.

Companion dogs are often golden retrievers, Labradors and Labradoodles because these breeds tend to be very calm and intelligent.

If you adopt a companion dog from a rescue setting, you have to be cautious about the dog's history. It's important to learn more about a dog's history before bringing it into your home to reduce the likelihood of a bad reaction when the dog feels scared or threatened.

Service Dogs

Service dogs are in a separate category because these dogs receive special training and certification. They help someone with disabilities perform functions in their daily life. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, a person can legally bring their service dog in all public spaces, including restaurants.

Service dogs usually wear a vest or another form of identification, so it's apparent they are working and shouldn't be disturbed.

A service dog is uniquely trained to meet the needs of the person it will be helping.

An autism service dog might help a child with anxiety when they go to school or in public, for example.

There are even service dogs that can interrupt self-harming behaviors or serious emotional situations like panic attacks.

A service dog that's not properly trained can be dangerous, so when a family is considering a service dog, they should only work with an accredited agency.

What Type of Dog Is Needed in Specific Circumstances?

The following are example situations and the type of dog that would be right for each.

- If someone has anxiety while flying or in situations such as going to doctor's appointments, an emotional support dog would be the right fit.
- If a child is experiencing anxiety at school, a therapy dog would be needed.
- An emotional support dog provides companionship for one person in their daily activities.
- For autism, a service dog may be the best fit.

How Can a Therapy Dog Help a Child with Autism?

Trained dogs may have therapeutic benefits for children with autism, [according to research](#).

For example, one study of 22 children found that when a dog was present in a therapy session, the children were more socially engaged and talked more. In another study, when there was a dog included in a therapy session, children were less aggressive and smiled more.

In two other studies recently received by researchers, parents said their children with autism tended to behave better and be more attentive after they got a service dog.

Specific ways a therapy dog might help a child with autism include:

- Children who have autism often deal with emotional outbursts. A therapy dog can help a child stay calmer in these situations or help prevent these scenarios.
- Repetitive motions and behaviors are common symptoms of autism, but a trained therapy dog may help reduce these behaviors. Some therapy dogs are trained to recognize when these symptoms will start, and they can then interrupt them.
- Some autistic children are prone to wandering off, and a dog may bark to let family members know if this is happening.

- Specifically trained therapy dogs may be able to play “games” with an autistic child to help with sensory processing. For example, games could include tug of war or hide and seek.
- Therapy dogs can help a child with autism be more confident to engage with their environment.
- Nonverbal children may increase how much they speak with their therapy dog is present.
- A therapy dog or companion dog provides friendship and love and can help combat loneliness a child might feel.
- Having a dog with them might help a child sleep better.
- Having a dog can create a sense of consistency, even when there are a lot of changes in a child’s environment.

Is a Therapy Dog Right for Your Child?

While there are many possible benefits of bringing a dog into your home, it’s not the right option for every family.

Considerations to keep in mind include:

- Does your child have sensory issues that could be triggered by a dog? For example, might a dog's wiry fur be triggering for your child? What about barking? Could barking be disturbing to your child?
- How much can you afford to pay? If you want a true therapy or service dog, extensive training is necessary. According to Autism Service Dogs of America, the costs can be more than \$10,000. This doesn't mean that all dogs will cost this much, and you can also opt for a well-trained comfort dog rather than a specifically trained service or therapy dog.
- What are your child's needs in particular? What benefits do you hope a dog will bring to your child's life?
- Are you ready to take on the responsibility of a dog? Whether it's a therapy dog or not, dogs still come with a lot of responsibility. If you already have an autistic child and other members in your family you're taking care of, can you take on a dog? There will be more cleaning, daily walks, and feeding needed, as well as vet visits.
- If you are getting a therapy dog, be aware that it will require certain behavioral training and living conditions that are different from family



dogs.

When choosing a dog for your child with autism, the following are important factors:

- What is the temperament of the dog? You want a dog that is calm but also sociable.
- Your dog must be easy to train and intelligent. The hope is that your child will also be giving commands.
- High energy dogs don't tend to be the best match for children with autism.

Organizations That Can Help

If you'd like to explore the options for your family to find a dog, the following organizations can help:

- 4 Paws for Ability is a nonprofit that trains and places task-trained service dogs. 4 Paws for Ability can help your autistic child become more independent, and 4 Paws for Ability also educates the public about the use of service dogs in public places
- Autism Service Dogs of America provides dogs that serve as an emotional anchor for children with autism. The group was founded in 2002 and

they train each service dog for the individual needs of a family they're placed with.

- Alliance of Therapy Dogs is an international registry of certified therapy dog teams. They do testing, certification, registration, insurance, and support for members who volunteer with their dogs in certain activities assisted by animals.
- NEADS Social Dog Program helps provide service dogs for children ages 8 to 16 with autism or other developmental disabilities. To be matched with one of their service dogs, you have to visit their NEADS campus in Princeton, MA for an intake interview and in-person evaluation.
- SDWR offers autism service dog grants. Their grants help provide recipients with the funds they'll need to train an autism service dog, and grant amounts range from \$25,000 to \$7,500.

Summing Up

A support or service dog might be a good part of your autistic child's daily life and can be therapeutic for them. Before you commit to bringing a dog into your family, think about your child's individual needs and what role a dog will play in those. You should also make sure your family is ready for the significant responsibility of a new dog.

Sources

<https://4pawsforability.org/autism-assistance-dog/>

<https://www.therapydogs.com/alliance-therapy-dogs/>

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/expert-opinion/service-dog-or-therapy-dog-which-best-child-autism>

<https://www.globalautismproject.org/things-to-consider-before-getting-an-autism-service-dog-for-your-child/>

<https://www.webmd.com/brain/autism/news/20130226/can-therapy-dogs-help-kids-with-autism#3>

<https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/lifestyle/service-working-therapy-emotional-support-dogs/>

<https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/therapy-dog-can-help/>

<https://www.autismservicedogsofamerica.org/faq>

<https://www.sdwr.org/autism-service-dog-grant-opportunities/>





“Paw-fully” Cool Pet Therapy Benefits

Man’s best friend and medicine: a pet therapy dog! A growing amount of scientific evidence suggests that pet therapy helps to improve overall health and quality of life for:

- 🐾 Cancer and heart attack patients in the hospital
- 🐾 Children and adults with physical and mental disabilities
- 🐾 Children facing long-term hospitalization
- 🐾 Aging adults in nursing homes, hospitals and retirement homes
- 🐾 Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Physical Benefits of Pet Therapy





1

Lowers Blood Pressure



Pet therapy reduces anxiety and stress which are associated with an increased risk for cardiovascular disease.

2

Lessens Physical Pain



Animal assisted therapy helps release endorphins that manipulate perceptions of pain or stress.

3

Reduces Fatigue



Particularly in cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy, pet therapy is used to fight fatigue, a common side effect of treatment.

4

Improves Fine Motor Skills



Playing with animals emits important hormones and neurotransmitters in the brain that promote proper body function and rebuild strength.

5

Motivates Daily Exercise



Taking your exercise buddy on a 30-minute walk each day will help you meet minimum recommendations for healthy physical activity.

Emotional Benefits of Pet Therapy



6

Lifts Spirits & Lessens Depression



Pet therapy increases the body's level of oxytocin, which boosts happiness, improves empathy and promotes a happier life.

7

Reduces Anxiety & Stress



Animal companionship can lower the level of cortisol, a hormone associated with stress, in the body and increase serotonin, a chemical associated with well-being.

8

Improves Self-Esteem



A bond between a pet and human is one of unconditional love, which can teach and support feelings of self worth and value, especially in children.

Social Benefits of Pet Therapy



9

Decreases Feelings of Isolation



For those who may feel like detaching from normal social activity, pet therapy can relieve feelings of social isolation.

10

Increases Communication



Pet therapy provides the opportunity for individuals to interact, engage and socialize with both the pet and its owner.

11

Improves Focus & Attention



Especially in young children, animal assisted therapy is a great way to release excess energy for better concentration.

12

Calms & Relaxes



The sensory stimulation involved in animal companionship can help to calm and relax individuals in new social environments.



UnityPoint Health
Des Moines

YOU MAY LIKE



The Ultimate
Clean-House Guide
for Dog Owners

JANUARY 17, 2021

