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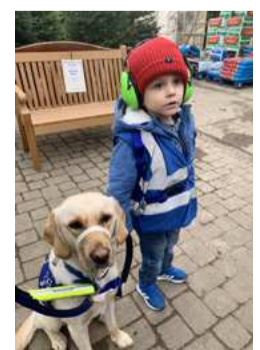
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Man's Best Friend: How Assistance Dogs Help Autism Families

By **Martin ATKIN**

AUTISM SERVICE DOGS ARE MORE THAN JUST A BEST FRIEND, THEY CAN HELP WITH EVERYDAY LIVING IN AMAZING WAYS!

“Going out and about, going into shops, and going to new places has always been really difficult,” says Jo Jordan, mother of Franklin. “There would be months when we couldn’t get him into the car or out of the house; it was awful. We could not get him out of the door.”

Franklin was diagnosed with autism at the age of two, and Jo’s story is familiar to many parents of a child with autism. Routine shopping trips, days out, or visits to friends and family become fraught with challenges. Family life is disrupted, siblings feel they are missing out, and every outing has the potential for disaster.

But with the help of an autism assistance dog, many families are now finding their lives have been transformed. “Having a dog



Franklin Jordan and his autism assistance dog Thunda. © Support Dogs.

makes a huge difference,” says Nuala Geraghty, CEO of [Autism Assistance Dogs Ireland](#). “Very simple everyday tasks which we take for granted can be so stressful for the parents of a child with autism.

Often they will have almost stopped taking the child out because it’s just too stressful. A properly trained dog can benefit the whole family.”

Now, thanks to autism assistance dog Thunda, Franklin will happily go for walks or accompany his mum to the shops while tethered to the dog. “A simple trip to the supermarket is run of the mill for most people, but it’s amazing for us—we are starting small, but hoping to build on this!” says Jo.

Keep them safe

“Safety is the priority for most parents,” says Nuala. “The child is attached to the dog’s jacket with a belt and there’s a handle they can hold on to as well. The parent holds the lead and gives the commands. If the child attempts to run, the dog is taught to wait in a stationary position, and that gives the parent time to react.

Reduce stress

“For the parents, the main thing is that it reduces their anxiety. If there’s a noise or something sensory the child doesn’t like, they could be gone in a second.

“Without the dog, the parent has to hold on to the child’s hand all the time. There can be a lot of tension conveyed through that, but when they are attached to the dog it gives them a sense of being independent from their parent,” she explains.

“The dog can also help reduce obsessive routines and repetitive behavior. We can teach the dog to interrupt that behavior by doing gentle nudges.”

“Without the dog, the parent has to hold on to the child’s hand all the time. There can be a lot of tension conveyed through that, but when they are attached to the dog it gives them a sense of being independent from their parent.”

At home, an autism assistance dog can help reduce stress for the whole family. “A lot of parents tell us that just having the dog in the house seems to lower everyone’s levels of anxiety, not just the child. Everyone’s calmer.”

Help with challenging behaviors

Apart from providing security when out and about, autism assistance dogs are trained to help reduce challenging behavior at home. “When visitors come to the house, the child will see that the dog is friendly to them, and that encourages the child to interact with them too,” says Rita Howson, chief executive of [Support Dogs](#) in Sheffield, UK, which successfully trained autism assistance dog Thunda for Jo Jordan and Franklin.

“The dog can also help reduce obsessive routines and repetitive behavior. We can teach the dog to interrupt that behavior by doing gentle nudges. Other children respond well to gentle pressure—we can teach the dog to lie across their legs or rest its head on the child’s lap.”

“Some children don’t have a huge emotional connection with the dog, they don’t need that, but they know that the dog helps them when they are out—that’s the main benefit for them,” adds Nuala. “But some kids love that connection, it depends to a large extent on their sensory needs.

“At one end of the scale you have kids that like to hug and squeeze, they like the feel of the fur. Others don’t like to touch, or they don’t like the cold wet nose! It’s not the same for everyone—it is a very individual thing.”

Quality assurance

Both Autism Assistance Dogs Ireland and Support Dogs are members of Assistance Dogs International (ADI), the world’s leading standards setter and accreditation body for assistance dogs. ADI certified dogs are trained to ensure they not only provide the best support for their users but are safe and well behaved in public.

“Not every dog is suitable, and the standards are so high that not every dog can make it through,” says Nuala. “That can be incredibly disappointing, but you know you are achieving the best possible outcomes for the dogs and the clients. There are also practical considerations; our dogs are all insured to go into public places, they enjoy optimum health, and we are confident they can have a long working life.”

Training an autism assistance dog, however, is expensive and intensive—it can take up to two years to reach the required standard. There’s a long waiting list and families must meet strict criteria to be accepted onto the program.

Currently, Support Dogs only work with families whose children with autism are aged between three and eight. “All the research suggests that is the age when a child is most receptive to change,” explains Rita. “But it’s very much individual to each child, we work closely with the parents to find out exactly what the needs are and how the dogs can help with that.”

“ Training an autism assistance dog, however, is expensive and intensive—it can take up to two years to reach the required standard. ”



Photo © Support Dogs.

“It is quite a rigorous and involved process. We hold information days so parents can speak to our trainers to make sure they understand what’s involved, and to talk to families that already have an autism assistance dog.”

“Parents of children with autism already have a lot to cope with, so they need to understand they are taking on an additional responsibility. That can be quite daunting; but, the benefits can be huge.”

The whole family benefits

An autism assistance dog can benefit the whole family. Siblings of children with autism sometimes say that before the dog arrived, the family felt fragmented and unable to do things together—but having the dog means they can go out as a family. Parents often report that they take the dog for walks while the child is at school, benefiting from fresh air, exercise and time alone to de-stress.

The need is great

Demand for autism assistance dogs far exceeds the rate at which they can be trained and placed with families. “We get at least a couple of phone calls or emails every single day from people wanting to go on the waiting list,” says Nuala. “I don’t think we’ll ever get to the point where we can meet all the demand.

“It’s partly driven by increased awareness of what dogs can do, and partly by the growing number of families that need help. People hear about the massive difference dogs have made to the lives of children with autism and their families, and quite naturally they want to be part of that.”

As a result, some desperate parents may resort to training their own pet dog or obtaining one from a non-ADI accredited trainer. “There are so many organizations out there, but ADI really does care about welfare and standards, and that’s important for us and for our clients,” says Rita. “It’s important for the families to know that we adhere to the highest possible standards and that we provide 24/7 support. It’s tough enough having a child with autism, but it’s even tougher if you have no support.”

“Sometimes it can be a struggle, but when you see the dogs actually go to the families, and you hear those success stories and the difference it makes—that keeps driving you on,” says Nuala. “It can be something as simple as being able to go to the shop for a pint of milk or going out together for the day as a family.

“People hear about the massive difference dogs have made to the lives of children with autism and their families, and quite naturally they want to be part of that.”

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“Hearing those stories really drives you to train and place more dogs. I’ve always been a dog lover, and it’s amazing the difference that a dog can make.”

Jo Jordan and son Franklin would certainly agree. “We’d never had a dog as a family, so we weren’t sure how Franklin would react to it,” says Jo, who blogs at [Spinning in Circles](#). “Franklin instantly bonded with Thunda; they seemed so comfortable together.

“As soon as Franklin makes a noise or gets upset or cries, Thunda always seems to know where he is and will go straight over to him. He has become a huge part of our family over the last couple of years, and has made the most incredible difference to all our lives. We couldn’t imagine life without him!



Martin Atkin is a communications consultant to Assistance Dogs International and several other international non-profit organizations. He is a former journalist with the BBC, ITN and Sky News, and is founder and director of Funnelweb Media.