



# INFORMATION PAPER

## Research to Inform Practice



### Service Dogs and Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Some people with disabilities use working dogs to assist and support them in accessing a full range of activities in their daily lives. The most commonly recognized assistance animals are dogs. As assistance animals, dogs provide help for the visually and hearing impaired, serve as an alert system for impending seizures, and offer additional strength and mobility for the physically disabled. Assistant animals are reported to also provide emotional support and have a positive impact upon the well-being of their users (Canine Companions for Independence, 2008, Department of Agriculture, 2004).

This paper explores the increasing advocacy for the academic and social benefits of service dogs for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and their families. This advocacy is extending to increasingly frequent requests for service dogs to accompany children with ASD within the school setting.

#### Why is the issue important?

Autism is a developmental disability affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction which impacts a child’s educational performance. Other characteristics associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change, or change in daily routines. Some individuals may experience unusual responses to sensory stimuli (Simpson et al., 2004).

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recently indicated that autism now affects approximately 1% or 1 in every 110 American children. Leading researchers in Canada (NEDSAC, 2008) indicate that our prevalence statistics do not differ significantly from what the CDC is reporting (Autism Society of Canada). Dr Susan Bryson,

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Information Papers provide a review and summary of research on requested topics. The papers aim to promote informed decision making about issues and practices that affect the education and well-being of children with autism within our public education systems.

**Disclaimer**

*This document synthesizes current knowledge and offers recommendations for consideration.*

*It does not constitute provincial education policy or commit Departments of Education to the activities described. This documented originates with the Interprovincial Autism Advisory Group.*



in her 2009 report of issues related to the education of children and youth with autism spectrum disorder in Atlantic Canada, indicates an estimated prevalence rate of 1 in every 83-143 students. These numbers “parallels those documented in recent epidemiological surveys conducted in the US, UK and elsewhere in Canada” (p. 5).

With the rising number of children diagnosed with ASD in the school system, there is also increasing advocacy from families, advocates and professional groups for appropriate and individualized educational programs for these students. Training service dogs to help individuals with autism is relatively new, but has been receiving growing attention over the past two decades. The service dogs are trained to respond and follow commands given by the child’s caregiver (parent or legal guardian) while at home and in the community or by an educator while at school. The caregiver is fully responsible for the service dog’s care and maintenance (i.e. maintaining service dog training, health care, feeding, grooming and exercise). The caregiver acts as a liaison between the child with autism and the service dog.

While there is little research on how these animals affect children with autism, families report that they have seen improvements in their children who struggle with self-stimulatory behaviors, impulsive running, anxiety and communication challenges. National Service Dogs, an organization established in 1996 in Cambridge, Ontario (the first organization in Canada to provide this service) has graduated over 170 autism service dog across Canada. The

organization claims the trained dogs increase safety levels and impede bolting when tethered to the child. Autism Dog Services Inc. (ADS) established in 2007 in Lynden, Ontario, makes a similar claim and trains service dogs specifically for children with autism and related disorders. This organization maintains that the service dogs bring many social and academic benefits. They assert that service dogs can assist the child in an inclusive environment and foster the growth of communication, social interaction and independence for the student with autism and related disorders.

In addressing a parent’s request for a service dog as an accommodation for their child with ASD, schools should not only be aware of the research, but also be mindful of possible legal implications associated with such an accommodation. Although there are no reported court cases in Canada, two elementary school students with autism have recently won court orders in Illinois allowing their dogs to accompany them to school. Their lawsuits follow others in California and Pennsylvania over schools’ refusal to allow dogs that parents report calms their children, ease transitions and keep their child safe. At issue is whether the dogs are true “service dogs” that are essential to managing a disability or basically serve as companions that provide comfort. The courts, however, under the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act, argue that a person with autism would be considered a person with a disability; and a service animal is any guide dog, signal dog or other animal individually trained to provide assistance to someone with a disability.

## **PARENT PERSPECTIVES**

Parents and proponents of service dogs for children with autism speak to many benefits but in general delineate four areas in which a service dog can assist the family and child:

### **Safety**

The service dog acts as a physical anchor for the child with autism. The dog is trained to stop on command thus preventing the child from entering into potentially dangerous situations and giving time to intervene. A belt system joining the service dog and child may be used to offer a higher degree of safety.

### **Independence and Public Outings**

Families are able to pursue activities together that may have been difficult in the past due to concerns for the child's safety, difficulty in coping with new environments or managing the child's behavioural outbursts and anxiety in public settings. The service dog allows the child to walk more independently of the caregiver and acts as a constant companion to the child. The child can assist with the daily care of their service dog, thus furthering opportunities for independence, and a sense of responsibility for another.

### **Behavior**

Service dogs may help modify behaviour by providing a calming influence, allowing the child to cope with transitions between places, activities, and changes in routines.

### **Community and Social Benefits**

The service dogs are seen as bridging the social gap between children with autism and others by providing opportunities for communication and assisting with the integration of children with peers and the public.

## **What does the research and literature tell us?**

Most literature reporting on the benefits of service dogs for children with autism is still anecdotal in nature and mostly identifies the benefits as perceived by parents and service dog organizations. Quality research in this area is limited and provides very little scientific data upon which to measure or to understand the impact of service dogs for children with ASD.

Burrows (2008) in a qualitative study followed 10 families in Ontario with children with ASD over a six-to-twelve month period. The authors conducted interviews with the parents and observed family dog interactions as trained service dogs were integrated into their family. Families reported reduced stress and anxiety as they viewed the service dog as providing increased safety and security for their child, i.e. the dog provided an additional means through which to monitor their child. Parents reported the dog had a calming and regulating influence on the child. The families also indicated the presence of the service dog facilitated social inclusion for the family and child through enhanced social recognition and awareness of autism. The purpose of the study was to describe through the words of parent, the interactional relationships (between the parent, service dog and child) and the role of the service dog within the family. It is important to note that this study did not attempt to assess the effect of the service dog in relation to the child with autism and did not utilize tools to directly measure the child's behavior.

There is some research in the area of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) to suggest that children with autism in the presence of trained dogs are more social, demonstrate reduced stereotypic behaviors and can be more appropriately engaged in interactions with others. Redeker and Goodman (1989) looked at whether the presence of dogs could be helpful during therapy sessions with children with ASD. The therapist conducted a series of therapy sessions without and in the presence of a dog. When the dog was present children showed fewer repetitive and negative behaviors and were more actively engaged in simple games and imitating the therapist's actions. The therapist was able to use the dogs as a conduit to engage and extend interactions with the child. Prothmann and colleagues in a 2009 study of 14 children with ASD indicated that when given a choice, the children demonstrated a preference to interact with a dog over a person or a selection of toys. The authors contend that this indicates that

there may be some benefits in using pets as a mechanism to engage socially withdrawn children. Animals are believed to enhance the relationship between children with ASD and their environment, which in turn may result in improvement in their social functioning (Martin and Farnum, 2002).

The only study found concerning possible physiological effects of service dogs on children with ASD was released by researchers in Quebec (Viau, 2010) in the *Journal of Psychoneuroendocrinology*. Physical stress responses were assessed by measuring the salivary cortisol levels of 42 children with ASD in three experimental conditions; prior to and during the introduction of a service dog to their family, and after a short period during which the dog was removed from their family. Before the introduction of service dogs, the study measured a 58% increase in morning cortisol after awakening, which diminished to 10% when service dogs were present. The increase in morning cortisol jumped

back to 48% once the dogs were removed from the families ( $p < 0.05$ ). Parents also reported, through a qualitative questionnaire, a reduction in their child's problematic behavior however a correlation was not found between the cortisol awakening response and the number of disruptive behaviors. The authors contend that this significant reduction in cortisol levels lends support to the potential behavioral benefits of service dogs for children with autism. Although this study does provide some degree of reliability, it is a single study without replication and without a control group. This makes any interpretation of outcomes speculative.

Lack of research in this area makes it difficult to draw any conclusions upon the impact of service dogs for children with ASD. Solid, experimental studies are still required to provide a better understanding of the possible benefits of the animal-child bond and its value as a component of intervention for children with autism.

## What are the legal implications?

Schools may question whether dogs for children with ASD are true "service dogs", that is, are they essential to managing a disability or do the dogs simply provide comfort and companionship to the child. Regardless of this concern, there is a movement across the United States and Canada to consider a service dog in some cases as a reasonable accommodation.

The article, *Autism, Schools, and Service Animals: What Must and Should be Done*, published in *The Journal of Law & Education*, Schoehbaechler (2010) reviews the issues and laws in the United States surrounding the request for service animals for children with autism spectrum disorders.

Schoehbaechler identifies three primary federal US statutes that relate to requests by students with disabilities to bring service animals into schools. These statutes include the *Rehabilitation* and the *Americans with Disabilities Act* which enforces a duty to not discriminate against the disabled and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* which imposes a duty to provide free appropriate public education to all students.

Schoelbaechler, in light of these US statutes, advances the following legal perspective concerning the consideration of service dogs as a reasonable accommodation for students in schools within the states;

- If a reasonable accommodation (e.g. a service dog) allows a student with a disability to be more mobile, to communicate better, learn more, care for himself, or perform other manual tasks, then a school should allow that accommodation.
- If an individual is disabled and the service animal must perform tasks that alleviate specific impairments, then the school must allow the service animal as long as it is deemed a reasonable accommodation.
- Once a disability is identified, then the school must develop an Individual Education Plan to provide the student with appropriate education. Thus if a service animal is required for a student to receive an appropriate education then the school would likely have to allow the animal. At the same time, Schoenbaechler (2010) makes a distinction between assists and need, i.e. if the animal assists (may benefit from the value of a dog), but is not needed for the student to receive appropriate education then the school would not be required to allow the animal at school.

Similar laws and acts, as those in the US, exist in Canada that would potentially align with the same arguments proposed by Schoenbaechler. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Human Rights Code* (Manitoba) establishes a duty to accommodate disability. In education there is a duty to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities to allow them to access educational services equally, unless to do so would cause undue hardship (Council for Exceptional Children, 2010).

Each province and territory maintains its own human rights legislation that protects against discriminatory treatment based upon disability. Several provinces use this approach to the exclusion of more specific laws for disabled persons (Manitoba, New Brunswick, Northwest Territories, Prince Edward Island, Saskatchewan, and Yukon).

For example, Prince Edward Island's Human Rights Act, Chapter H-12, addresses discrimination and includes persons who could be accompanied by Assistance Dogs in the definition of physical disability:

*“physical or mental handicap” means a previous or existing disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement, whether of a physical or mental nature, that is caused by injury, birth defect or illness, and includes but is not limited to epilepsy, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical coordination, blindness or physical or mental handicap, visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment, or physical reliance on a guide dog, wheelchair or other remedial device.*

Several provinces have additional legislation that makes specific provisions for people accompanied by a guide or assistant animal (BC, Alberta, Ontario, NL and NS). More recently of special significance is the [Service Dogs Act](#), proclaimed by Alberta in January 1, 2009. This act guarantees access to all public places for Albertans with disabilities that use qualified service dogs. These are the same rights that apply to blind and/or visually impaired persons who use a guide dog. Thus in Alberta, it is an offence to refuse access to any public place to a person with a disability who is using a qualified service dog.

## Considerations for developing guidelines



As a result of the increasing requests for service dogs in schools for children with ASD and recent court rulings, several states and some provinces have established policies to address this practice. The Virginia Department of Education in 2008 concluded the “*Code of Virginia* afforded each student a near absolute right to be accompanied by a service dog in a Virginia public school”. However they also recognized this practice must be “qualified and carefully weighed against the rights of other students who are equally entitled to receive educational benefits at the school and against the school division’s ongoing legal responsibility to operate, maintain, and supervise schools” (p.2). To support administrators in developing policy regarding service dogs in schools, the Virginia Department of Education disseminated comprehensive guidelines. These guidelines provide a policy template and comprehensive framework that may be

used by schools. The guidelines address numerous areas such as training and certification, health considerations, identifiers of service dogs, administrative considerations [GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOL DIVISION POLICY AND PROCEDURES REGARDING ...](#) (Virginia Department of Education Division, 2011).

In Ontario, at least two school districts, the St. Claire Catholic District School Board [Use of Service Dogs in Schools by Students](#) and the Grand Erie District School Board have recently (2011) established policy and procedures for the accommodation of service dogs in schools and these are inclusive of service dogs for children with ASD ([ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE Use of Service Dogs](#)). These documents are also comprehensive in that they provide a policy statement, background, definitions, registering requirements and administration procedures.

## Summary and Recommendations

There is very limited scientific evidence to inform educators and practitioners on the impact of service dogs on children with ASD. Current literature and research is anecdotal and/or qualitative in nature and mostly highlights the benefits as reported by parents; an increased sense of security and safety as the service dog is viewed as an additional guardian of the child, the calming effect for the child created through the companionship of the dog and the service dog as a means of promoting positive social interaction/inclusion.

There is still a great deal of research required to better inform families and practitioners about the effectiveness of service dogs for children with ASD. In the meantime, agencies across the country are training service dogs and supporting families as they integrate the dog into the family. Families, in turn are requesting schools allow these dogs to accompany their children to school as they see them as ensuring the safety of their child and enhancing their child’s ability to more functionally and socially participate within the educational setting.

In light of the increasing requests by parents to have service dogs accompany their children with ASD to school and the associated legal implications, the following recommendations are provided:

1. This paper highlights some of legal issues that may impact decision planning concerning service dogs as an accommodation in schools for children with ASD and should not be considered a legal opinion. Individual jurisdictions should seek legal advice as they consider developing policy and guidelines to address this issue.
2. The request for schools to consider service dogs as a possible accommodation for children with ASD is increasing. It is recommended provinces/districts prepare for such requests by developing or clarifying guidelines to assist in and support decision making.
3. There are a number of issues to be considered as schools develop policies and guidelines to guide their response to requests for service dogs as an accommodation for children with ASD. These include, but are not limited to, the following:
  - Health issues such as allergies of other students and school personnel;
  - Registration and certification of the service dog with a recognized training center;
  - Designated handler for the dog in cases where the child is too young to manage the dog on their own;
  - Training for designated handlers in the school;
  - The care and welfare of the service dog while in the school setting;
  - Transportation of dog and child;
  - The education of staff and students concerning the purpose and protocols for interaction with the service dog;
  - Liability in case of harm - harm to an individual by the dog or harm incurred by the dog;
  - Potential risks, and costs.
4. If a service dog is considered a reasonable accommodation for a student, then this accommodation should be appropriately documented. The purpose of this accommodation should be clearly identified and a process be put in place to evaluate its effectiveness.

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**Note: This paper is produced by the Interprovincial Autism Advisory Committee. It will be amended as new information comes to light through relevant research and literature. If you would like to make a comment or provide additional information related to this topic area please forward it to: [sheila\\_bulmer@apsea.ca](mailto:sheila_bulmer@apsea.ca)**

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