



# Service Dogs for Autism

These furry companions help bring out the best in children on the spectrum.

by Donald Fraser

**A**damo, 9, has always had trouble with bedtime. Like most children on the autism spectrum, he has an irrational fear of night. Until last spring, bedtime was accompanied by frustration, tears and tantrums.

Then Hitch came along. A recently graduated certified service dog from National Service Dogs, Hitch was brought in to help both Adamo and his family adapt to the difficulties of life with autism. And the results have been amazing.

“Our bedtime routine is one of the most notable changes since Hitch arrived,” says mom Adelina. “I can’t believe how quickly Adamo gets ready for bed. When it is time to go to sleep, there is a lot less fuss.”

She explains that, “At first, when we would leave the room, Adamo would get out of bed, go and lie on the floor beside Hitch, and immediately fall asleep there.” Hitch, being the well-trained dog that he is, made his own adjustment. He began sleeping beside Adamo’s bed so the child would stay put.

“I never imagined that bedtime could actually be enjoyable,” says Adelina.

## How the program started

Guide dogs for the blind have been a part of our society for a long time. They show up in literature as early as the 16th Century, where a children’s nursery rhyme reads, “B was a Blind-man/Led by a dog.” Official training organizations for guide dogs began in North

America and Europe in the 1920s and 30s.

Providing service dogs for children with autism, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon – and one that began right here in Ontario.

National Service Dogs (NSD), an organization in Cambridge, ON, was the first to team a service dog with a child with autism. In 1996, a black lab named Shade was introduced to Brodie, a 3-year-old in desperate need of help. The incredible success of the pairing generated world wide media coverage.



In just a few years, other service dog programs for children with autism began cropping up throughout Canada and in other countries. The success of these programs has been overwhelming, with lengthy waiting lists for acceptance.

“It has been exciting to see how it has taken off,” says Danielle Forbes, NSD’s executive director. “It’s a service that has been proven effective at making life more manageable for

kids with autism and their families. Service dogs have given so many people a new chance at living more normal lives.”

## A boy and his dog

When a child has autism, family life can be disruptive. Symptoms of autism can include uncontrollably violent tantrums, bolting away from caregivers, physical lashing out, manic mood swings, irrational fears, self-harm, as well as a need for constant supervision and management. Autism can place incredible stress and emotional hardship on all members of the family.

While a service dog cannot alleviate or eliminate all symptoms, it can help children with autism and their loved ones live more full and rewarding lives.

“The primary function of these dogs is safety,” says Forbes. “Many children with autism have no impulse control. They are bolters. They see something that catches their attention and they go. Not at a walk. Not wandering. But at warp speed. When tethered to a service dog, however, a child has an anchor. The dog isn’t going to be pulled away. He’s going to hold his ground and keep the child where they are supposed to be.”

Katrina is the mother of Max, a 7-year-old with autism. Until recently, she says, “We couldn’t go for walks. We couldn’t go to the mall. We couldn’t go shopping. Really, we couldn’t go anywhere that most other people take for granted. When it came time to buy

shoes, I'd have to trace Max's feet and bring the drawing into the store. Between the behavioural issues and the bolting, it was simply impossible."

Last year Max and his family were introduced to Chester, a 2-year-old Labrador/Retriever service dog. He now plays a pivotal role in their lives, says Katrina. "Chester helps keep Max under control. He does his job well and takes it seriously. He holds his ground and doesn't let Max take off."

All it takes is a simple "halt" command and service dogs keep children in place. They also keep kids on track when walking to ensure they stop at all intersections. Says Katrina, "The two of them will be walking ahead of me, and when they get to an intersection, Chester will turn and look back at me for instructions. It's as though he is saying, 'OK, so what do you want us to do next?'"

But while child safety is the major reason for service dog use, there are some exciting secondary benefits. "Max holds the handle on Chester's jacket like he'll never let go," says Katrina with a smile. "It gives him confidence and independence. From afar you see that relationship: a boy and his dog."

With fewer outbursts and behaviour difficulties, thanks to Chester, Max is ready for a big outing, says Katrina. "We're going on our first family vacation. Ever. We're going to Ocean City. There's a theme park, an aquarium, and a dog-friendly hotel."

## Creating new bonds

The bond between child and dog is often both immediate and lasting. And the pairing also helps children with autism create new bonds with the people around them, including family members, new friends, teachers and social/medical workers.

"A couple of things happen," notes Forbes. "First of all, families get out of the house more often, and get to participate in a

lot more experiences. This gets a child into an increasing number of social settings."

In addition, says Forbes, "service dogs attract a certain amount of attention. Questions and comments about the dog are a gateway to conversation. With the many social difficulties that children with autism face, these interactive openings are often essential to any form of communication. When prompted, kids are often eager to talk about their dogs."



Image licensed by Ingram Publishing



Service dogs also provide children with a sense of safety and security, helping them to cope in new situations. "Individuals with autism have difficulty transitioning to new situations and environments," explains Forbes. "They often experience sensory overload. But kids with service dogs really do cope better. The dogs act as a constant, a steadying, recognizable, constant. With something to distract or focus on, children don't obsess about their environment. And this keeps them from reacting in negative ways."

## Family for life

Bringing a service dog into a family is not a decision to be taken lightly. After all, dogs

require their own share of attention, care, and resources.

There are, however, numerous safeguards to ensure that a family is ready for life with a service dog. These include screening, matching and training.

Adelina explains how the matching process worked. "My husband, John, spent six days at the dog training facility – meeting and interacting with dogs. They wanted to find a dog that created a natural bond with the primary in-home trainer.

"Then they took the dogs to the hotel where John was staying to see how they interacted in a neutral site. This was followed by some intensive training for both John and Hitch."

At first, Adelina was apprehensive about bringing a dog into the house. "I've never been a pet owner, and I was already dealing with a child with autism. It seemed like a pretty big undertaking."

But the rewards were almost instant. "These dogs bring out the best in an autistic child. They really do. I quickly went from being nervous about getting a service dog to a person who really believes in their value and use. I'm a total convert."

Her advice to parents considering service dogs? "I'd say, at the very least, look into the program. These are extremely well-trained animals. Two years

of training and a great matching program mean that there will definitely be a good fit for you and your family. And if it is not meant to be, a good organization will tell you. They're not going to send a dog into a situation that doesn't work."

What's certain is that Max and Adamo have bonded completely with their dogs and have begun to interact more enthusiastically with the people around them. And with the love and affection shown by Hitch and Chester to their newfound families, these partnerships are going to be both long and lasting.

*Donald Fraser is a freelance writer working in television, radio, and print journalism. He's also a faithful friend to Cedar the dog.*