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Autistic Service Dogs

- Autism is a major public health problem that is the most common neurological disorder affecting children. Autism manifests itself most strikingly as impairments in formation of social relationships and communication.
- Existing literature suggests that dogs are crucial in children's social and cognitive development. Human-animal interactions may alleviate stress in children and reduce autistic characteristics and behaviors. Animals can act as transitional objects, where bonds formed between children and animals can be transferred to humans.
- Service dogs make autistic children safer, provide comfort and can help and support them interact socially and can reduce some parental stress.
- The dogs that work with autistic children are trained to work with specific behaviors that are unique to the autism spectrum including impaired or limited verbal ability and communication skills, an inability to connect well with his or her environment, an inability to read emotions, wandering and repetitive, often ritual-like behaviors.
- Tracking is one of their key tasks and is a relief for many parents of autistic children who wander.
- These dogs are trained in such a way that the child's behavior elicits a response in the dog that will be helpful, calming, protective (or all three) depending upon the task at hand.
- "Research indicates that the child with Autism displays behaviors toward their dog that they rarely, if ever, display towards human companions. In addition, the child that is partnered with a [service] dog is found to seek their dog out for companionship, comfort, and confiding in ways never shown to family members."
- using service dogs has a therapeutic effect that is heightened in a child with autism because of the powerful nature of communication between the dog and the child. The nonverbal avenue of interacting with a dog is important advantage because of the communication issues surrounding the autistic spectrum, and through this nonverbal advantage they help with socialization, emotional and educational issues.
- While there are many therapies being used and studied for helping autistic children, working with service dogs seems to be one that is having positive effects not only for autistic children but for their families as well.