

Why So Many Kids Love (and Need) Dogs

The rounds of email posts with touching photos of babies or children with the family dog attest to the loving and affectionate bond animals can have with humans. Even the unpredictable antics of toddlers who might pull a tail or ear or babies who grab onto hair are tolerated by most dogs.

It would be irresponsible to dismiss the number of dog bites each year or unprovoked attacks on children by dogs, yet such incidents represent a miniscule percentage of the millions of interactions in which dogs enrich the lives of children every day. *Canis familiaris* can rightfully be considered a spiritual and emotional consort with children, who is well worth the price of his (or her) kibble and treats.

Life lessons

Prominent animal authority Roger Caras writes that, “We derive immeasurable good, uncounted pleasures, enormous security, and many critical lessons about life by owning dogs.” (*A Celebration of Dogs*) And if we are lucky, those lessons can start early on.

As human beings grow from babies into young adults, they go through four fundamental stages that will shape how they interact with others later in life¹. In the first stage infants/toddlers decide whether the world is a welcoming or a frightening place. Can they **trust** their environment? Preschoolers experience the second stage when they leave their home setting and are challenged to find their own way in new, unfamiliar surroundings. Do they have the emotional security to become **autonomous** and to explore the new world independently?

Next, as elementary children become immersed in learning, their ability to master skills critical to their academic success are tested. Are they **industrious** enough (i.e., able to work hard enough) to learn spelling, reading, multiplication tables, writing and science concepts? The last stage encompasses the transition from teenager to adult. How will teenagers assert their **independence** as adults?

A Toddler's World

Dogs can become part of young children's lives² by making them feel secure in their surroundings and providing companionship as they explore the world. For toddlers with disabilities, a pet can be an integral part of meaningful interaction with their

¹ The four stages of development as a framework for understanding a child's life was first described by E. H. Erikson in *Childhood and Society* (1963).

² Babies, toddlers and generally children under 8 should not be left alone with any dog, no matter how trusted the pet is. Supervision ensures the dog's safety and wellbeing as well as the child's.

environment.

Dogs can communicate in ways that most people do not see or understand, yet this is unmistakable when a therapy dog³ walks into a special education classroom and gravitates to certain students, often to some of the most profoundly disabled. After two years of visits with a golden retriever and yellow lab, a 20-year-old high school student with severe handicaps could at last reach out her arms to greet them with a treat. With every visit, the dogs had come to Penny to give her kisses that resulted in gales of delighted laughter.

Progress was slow, but steady. Until the dogs starting coming to class, her arms were crossed against her chest and rigid. Their visits gave Penny a reason to stretch her arms toward the dogs. She wanted to rub their heads, to grasp a treat in her perpetually cramped hands to offer them. This may seem unremarkable, but before the day she could intentionally stretch out her arms, she could not participate in classroom activities or show her autonomy or independence. Although she was profoundly disabled, the therapy dogs gave her a means to communicate her desires, and eventually to reveal a glimmer of what she was truly capable of.

With the aid of a large electronic push button, Penny could turn on and off the classroom television with her fist while propped in her wheelchair. She could ring a buzzer to indicate her hunger or ask for help. But best of all, she could make biscuits for the dogs who had helped her become a little more independent. Penny's job was whirring broth, herbs and vitamins in a blender, a mixture that was then added to whole grain flours and rolled out and cut into bone-shaped dog treats.

During one visit while Polly (the golden retriever) did her sniff and taste tests, the blender was being readied for Penny's magic touch. She watched as broth was measured and poured into the blender, as fresh herbs and special nutrients were added. But for some reason there was a pause and her classmates were distracted. No one had secured the blender top and Penny had realized this.

She thrust her fist against the push button connected to the blender and green liquid splashed against walls, onto students' faces and over tables and chairs. Penny laughed at the chaos, laughed at her silliness, and her fellow students (and teacher) laughed with her. She had played a trick on them—and it was one of the first times she was able to demonstrate how much she wanted (and was able) to interact with her classmates.

Dogs can be helpmates and companions to children with other kinds of disorders that limit a child's abilities to cope in school or learn important academic skills. In a

³ Therapy dogs are owned by individuals who volunteer their time visiting healthcare or educational venues. They are *not* considered a special class of animals that are trained specifically to assist individuals with disabilities.

report from the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS)⁴, experts predict that three to six children in 1000 will be diagnosed with autism or Asperger's syndrome. It also appears that males are four times as likely as females to have the disorder.

Autism or Asperger's is a devastating diagnosis, but recent findings also indicate that early intervention can mitigate the problems that so often isolate children from family and peers. One of those interventions is an assistance dog.

Paws As Loving Support (PALS) is one non-profit organization located in Sonoma County that raises and trains dogs to become assistance dogs specifically for children with autism. Nancy Pierson, CEO of PALS, oversees breeding and training and previously trained dogs and taught educational workshops with the Assistance Dog Institute. As more parents of autistic children approached Nancy for advice on how to incorporate a dog into their child's life, she realized there was an important new job for dogs to do. That led her to founding PALS in 2009.

Other resources for specially trained assistance dogs in northern California include Canine Companions for Independence (CCI) and the Assistance Dog Institute (ADI)

Assistance dogs are socialized with humans from their first days of life by puppy-petters and are fostered by pre-approved families for their first year. During this time dogs also begin a long training process that readies them for more intense "graduate" studies to learn how to with people with disabilities.

Would your child benefit from an assistance dog?

Getting an assistance dog may take many months and requires both a financial and personal commitment: there is a lengthy application process, waiting period and training program with the prospective canine companion to make sure personalities and skills are compatible.

For further information and availability, you should contact PALS, CCI or ADI directly. Some individual trainers also train dogs for assistance work and should you choose that option, make sure to seek references, visit the training site before making any commitment, and ask for a history of dogs successfully placed with individuals.

PALS: www.pawsaslovingsupport.org 707-887-7257
7580 Covey Road, Forestville, CA 95436

CCI: www.caninecompanions.org 866-224-3647
PO Box 446, Santa Rosa, CA 95402-0446

⁴ www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/autism/detail_autism.htm

ADI: www.assistancedog.org 707-545-3647
1215 Sebastopol Road
Santa Rosa, CA 95407-6834

For more insights on the challenges children with autism face and their possibilities for success, look for the work of Temple Grandin. Her insights as a person with autism have led to groundbreaking work and research that is changing not only how our society views and treats animals, but illuminates how children and adults with autism see and experience their world. Look for *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* (1996); *The Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships* (2005); *Animals in Translation* (2005); *The Way I See It* (2008); *Animals Make Us Human* (2009); *Thinking in Pictures* (expanded edition, 2010).

Dr. Grandin also has a web site dedicated to her experiences with autism that is designed to help others with the disorder: www.templegrandin.com