

## THE USE OF THERAPY DOGS WITH AUTISTIC CHILDREN



The use of specially trained dogs to facilitate social interaction with children with autism has existed for almost 50 years. There is an increasing body of literature to demonstrate how dogs can increase the social interactions of autistic children, but also benefit their families too. Data may date back to the 1700's.

In a study by Solomon (2010), she discusses the anthropological and sociocultural perspectives of how dogs influence behavior. She found that therapy using service and therapy dogs benefits children with autism by affecting their typical interactive habits and helping them to become more adaptive. In her research, Solomon relays that there are myths and historical accounts of the nurturing relationship between wolves and humans dating back to the 1700's. She cites the work of Gessell (1940), Collins (2004) and Ikard (1962) who discuss the myths of wild children who were raised by wolves. It is surmised that these were children who may have been abandoned because they had a disability and would, perhaps, be diagnosed with autism if they lived today. Citing the work of Laughlin and Throop (2001), Solomon maintains that these myths contain some elements of reality and point to the idea that dogs provide a resource to help children with autism communicate more effectively with their families and environment. Of importance is that interaction with dogs shifts the focus away from the idea that social interaction is not only established by talking but can be established through several types of social interaction (Silverstein, 2004).

Notably, Solomon discusses how the evolution of dogs as pets has vastly changed the idea of the family unit and the story they tell others about themselves. Ascione 2005; Corsaro 1985; Melson 2001; Myers 1996, 1997 have shown that interaction with pets facilitates imagination, play and empathy, among other means of connection with others.

In a study published in the open-access journal of the British Medical Association, on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, researchers showed that families of children with autism spectrum disorders reported that their children were safer from outside danger and perceived that others are more respectful and more competent to handle their child. Parents were more likely to perceive comfort for their child and a stronger sense of freedom from the restrictions often felt by families due to the challenges of autism. In support of this, Autism Support Dogs (<http://www.autismsupportdogs.org/>) suggests 8 benefits of having an autism support dog. They are:

1. Increased safety for the child (prevents the child from bolting)
2. Parent has better control of the child by commanding the dog
3. Passively teaches the child responsibility
4. Positive changes in behavior (lower aggression/frustration levels for the child)
5. Child is comforted by the dog when he/she is upset

6. Gives parents and the child a higher degree of predictability in social settings
7. Improves the child's ability to participate in education, social and leisure activities because the canine reduces the stress associated with interacting with other people and getting involved in social situations.
8. Autism support dogs may enjoy the right of full public access in restaurants, on transit etc.

## References

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<http://www.autismsupportdogs.org/>