



Service Dog Types

The types of recognized service dogs are increasing in number as we learn more about the capabilities of dogs to assist people with disabilities. Historically, the public is most familiar with guide dogs for people with visual impairments. Today, service dogs provide a wide array of skills and assistance for people with physical, psychological, emotional and social challenges.

Autism Service Dogs

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) include a wide array of behavioral, communication and social disabilities. People diagnosed with ASD may also be referred to as being “on the spectrum.” Signs of ASD usually begin in early childhood

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and are present throughout the person’s life. Boys are more likely than girls to have ASD, except in cases of Rett syndrome. Current estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate that 1 in 68 children will be affected by ASD. The range of disability may vary widely, from appearing to be socially capable and having an extensive, advanced vocabulary to having little or no verbal communication skills and being unable to interact with other people. Persons affected with autism are often reluctant to have physical contact with others and may also exhibit physically uncoordinated movements or socially awkward behaviors, such as repeating words, phrases or unusual gestures. Sensory stimuli (touch, smell, taste, sounds) can be overwhelming for autistic individuals. A minor change in their normal routine can present a significant challenge.

As a service dog trainer, it is helpful for you to have a basic vocabulary and working knowledge of ASD as many disorders are included under this category. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) published in 2013 includes childhood disintegrative disorder, Rett syndrome, pervasive developmental disorders not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) and Asperger's syndrome under the ASD umbrella. People with ASD are, of course, unique individuals, but appreciating some of the more common behavioral patterns will improve your working relationships with adult ASD clients and with ASD children and their parents.

A formal diagnosis of ASD will involve a team of medical, mental health, neurological and educational specialists. No single test can confirm or rule out ASD. Professionals assess levels of intellectual disability and language impairment and administer other social and psychological tests. ASD may be suspected early in life if an infant appears to be more interested in objects than people, is reluctant to make eye contact or does not engage in verbal babbling typical of babies. Other ASD children develop normal language and social



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skills until the age of two or three years, when they begin to regress. These children often withdraw from interaction with others and may even stop speaking altogether. Older children and adults with autism often exhibit ritualized behaviors and can become highly agitated with changes in their routine or environment.

Researchers have not determined why there has been a rise in the incidence of ASD in recent decades. Causes are thought to be both genetic and environmental. Parental care and deficiencies in parental-infant bonding have been eliminated as factors in the development of autism. ASD is more common in premature babies and infants born to older parents, though the reason for this has not been identified. Genetic mutations, either inherited or occurring spontaneously around the time of fertilization, account for about twenty percent of autism cases. People with ASD have an increased rate of seizures and 20–30 percent of autistic individuals will have epilepsy by adulthood.

Many famous and highly successful individuals are on the autism spectrum. Having ASD does not necessarily limit one's potential for achievement. With the proper supports in place, many people with ASD can contribute and participate fully both socially and professionally. Temple Grandin, DVM, PhD., is a prime example. Dr. Grandin has autism and did not speak until she was three years old. Her peers considered her odd and had little to do with her. Through encouragement from her devoted family and inspiring teachers, Dr. Grandin went on to become a veterinarian and professor at Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine. She is one of the foremost experts in the world on animal behavior and a spokesperson for people with ASD.

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An autism service dog may be trained to assist at almost any level, depending on their handler's needs and level of functioning.

An autism service dog may be trained to assist at almost any level, depending on their handler's needs and level of functioning. A service dog can be specifically trained to respond to individual behaviors. A dog can sense when their handler is becoming distressed and can help prevent anxiety from elevating by distracting the person, interrupting the behavior or guiding the person to a safe, quiet place. The presence of a trusted canine companion may also reduce the frequency of such incidents because the handler is not alone when facing unfamiliar or potentially stressful situations. Autistic children may be prone to

crying, screaming or otherwise acting out since they are not able to effectively communicate their frustration in other ways. A service dog can detect such behavior before it occurs and help the child remain calm. If the child becomes unable to cope, their service dog brings comfort and can help them to self-soothe and relax, often shortening the duration of the episode. With children who have a tendency to wander off or to self-harm, a service dog can interrupt the child and also bring assistance from a parent or other adult.

One vital trait of service dogs, for autistic persons of any age, is their ability to encourage social interaction with other people. Not only is the handler likely to be more comfortable in the presence of their service dog, but others are more inclined to approach and speak with someone who has a dog than they are with a person who is alone. The common experience of having a dog is frequently a conversation starter and may help the autistic individual improve their communication skills in a non-threatening, informal environment.



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Mobility Service Dogs

Mobility disorders have a variety of causes. They may occur as a developmental or congenital disability before, during or shortly after birth. Cerebral palsy (CP) is one example. Most cases are congenital, although a minority occur or present after the first month of life. These cases are usually associated with a head injury or a brain or spinal cord infection, such as meningitis. Mobility disorders can also be the result of a progressive disease, such as multiple sclerosis (MS), where the immune system attacks the central nervous system. MS has many clinical signs, but muscle weakness and lack of coordination can be severe and cause significant disability. More than one million people in the U.S. are thought to have MS.

Muscular dystrophy (MD) has several types. One is caused by a genetic mutation and results in progressive atrophy and subsequent muscle weakness. When the diaphragm muscle is involved, the condition can progress to an inability to breathe. In teenagers, muscle weakening may be mild or extremely debilitating. Adult myotonic MD causes vision problems, heart issues and muscle spasms that can last for long periods of time.

Fibromyalgia, also known as chronic fatigue syndrome, is a condition affecting some five million Americans, mostly women. It is a poorly understood disease, thought perhaps to be a result of infection, injury, allergies or other environmental conditions, or a combination of these factors. Researchers believe that fibromyalgia alters the way the brain perceives pain. People who suffer from this condition may have reduced mobility due to stiffness and/or muscle pain and may also have memory or cognition difficulties.

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Vertigo is a loss of balance or a sensation of spinning that may also be accompanied by mild to severe nausea. Episodes can be unpredictable, sudden and dangerous if they cause a person to fall. People with uncontrollable vertigo are usually unable to drive or are legally prohibited from doing so. Inner ear infections or fluid buildup are common causes of temporary vertigo. Diseases such as Parkinson's and MS can result in ongoing episodes of vertigo, as can any medical condition causing low blood sugar (diabetes or hypoglycemia) or low blood pressure. Dizziness is also a side effect of certain medications, especially anticonvulsants taken to prevent seizures.

A catastrophic injury can cause permanent paresis (muscle weakness) or paralysis (loss of muscle movement). Traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) commonly occur in automobile and motorcycle accidents,



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pedestrian injuries, falls, assault or being struck by an object. Sports- and industrial-related TBIs may also cause permanent disabilities. TBI is a frequent diagnosis for military personnel and may occur in conjunction with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or with other life-changing injuries, such as an amputation.

Mobility issues can be particularly limiting as the person may not be able to care for themselves safely or properly without assistance.

Regardless of their cause, mobility issues can be particularly limiting as the person may not be able to care for themselves safely or properly without assistance. Without full use of their body, even ordinary tasks such as bathing, dressing or cooking

can be impossible. Moving from place to place, even within their home, can present difficult obstacles for people, in spite of adaptive modifications. People with mobility issues may lose their balance or tire easily, resulting in falls or body positions that compromise breathing or cause injury.

A well-trained service dog can perform many tasks for affected individuals. For example, moving a wheelchair requires upper body movement and coordination that can be fatiguing, even with a power-driven device. Research has demonstrated that using a service dog to pull a wheelchair, particularly when ascending ramps, helps reduce a person's upper body effort and preserve vital energy.



Mobility service dogs do much more than pull wheelchairs. They can be trained to provide a stable way for their handler to move from bed to chair, get into or out of a vehicle and safely move about without requiring human assistance. People who use canes, crutches or walkers have limited use of their arms and hands because they are holding on to the device. A service dog can retrieve fallen objects and perform countless other tasks, such as

turning lights on and off, assisting with dressing and opening doors. Not only do these dogs save time and increase safety, they enable their handlers to save their precious energy for more important tasks such as working, attending school or caring for their own family.

Psychiatric Disorder Service Dogs

A psychiatric or mental disorder can affect a person at any age and may include one or more difficulties in processing information, situations and/or emotions. People with such issues may have problems communicating their needs and may also act in ways that appear unusual or even bizarre to the outside observer. Because mental illness is not outwardly visible, victims are often misunderstood and socially ostracized, leading to depression and compounding the challenges of performing routine activities and maintaining personal relationships.



Partnering with a psychiatric service dog can significantly reduce the frequency and severity of symptoms of mental disorders.

A mental disorder is not a temporary response to a traumatic or stressful situation. It is a medically diagnosed illness. Many are treatable with medication, behavioral or group therapy, social programs and ongoing support from family and friends. In some cases, people recover fully from a mental illness but it is far more common for patients with severe disorders to require lifelong treatment. It is not unusual for symptoms of mental illness to vary over the course of the disease. Periods of stress, physical illness or significant change may bring about more severe clinical signs. In serious cases, decompensation may prevent an individual from being able to function outside a hospital setting.

Individuals with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) suffer from persistent and excessive worry or concern lasting more than six months. Physical symptoms, including sleep disturbances, nausea, muscle pain, headaches or unexplained pains elsewhere in the body, are also common, as are excessive perspiration, frequent elimination and trembling. Sufferers are often irritable, chronically fatigued and unable to focus or perform daily tasks. GAD is not the same as panic disorder, although the two have some similar symptoms.

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The psychiatric community has paid special attention to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The most recent edition of the DSM 5 includes several updates to this condition. Sufferers of PTSD are at significant risk for suicide. Though many people associate PTSD with wartime veterans and other military personnel, anyone experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event can be at risk. First responders, police officers, victims of crime or childhood or domestic abuse are commonly affected. People with PTSD react in a variety of ways. Some individuals withdraw from life and isolate themselves. Others act out aggressively or become abusive to family members, friends or authority figures. Depression, paranoia, substance abuse and other self-harming behaviors, nightmares and flashbacks may all occur with PTSD. Some victims may even have difficulty recalling the incident or time frame when the causative trauma occurred. PTSD and panic disorder may occur in the same person.

Partnering with a psychiatric service dog, sometimes referred to as a sensory or social signal dog, can significantly reduce the frequency and severity of symptoms of mental disorders and result in substantial improvements in the quality of a person's life. In addition to providing security and companionship, a service dog can be trained to signal their handler when they begin to escalate and before their symptoms become problematic. The dog can interrupt their



A service dog can interrupt a person's destructive thought pattern, reorient the person or guide them to a safe place.

destructive thought pattern, reorient the person or guide them to a safe or quiet place. Service dogs can also wake a person from a nightmare or prevent them from acting out in potentially self-destructive ways.

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Seizure Alert/Response Dogs

Epilepsy is one of the most common neurological disorders worldwide, with estimates of more than 65 million people affected. The condition can be genetic or caused by a brain injury due to trauma or infection. In the United States, well over 3 million people, including almost half a million children, suffer from seizures. A seizure is an electrical disturbance in the brain that causes a loss of awareness and sometimes uncontrolled, often severe, muscle spasms. A mild seizure may be short-lived and almost undetectable. During a severe seizure, a person's entire body undergoes violent spasms that can result in injury if the person falls or comes into contact with furniture, glass objects or other hard surfaces. Because seizures commonly occur randomly and without warning, people with epilepsy often avoid participating in normal activities and may shy away from public places and social gatherings for fear of having an episode that others may witness.



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When detecting a seizure, some dogs become restless, nudging or pawing their owner, going to a nearby person or lying or sitting on their owner to protect them or restrain their movements.

In the early 1990s, a Golden Retriever named Harley gained public attention when his owner, Victoria Doroshenko, revealed that he alerted her when she was about to have a seizure. Harley was able to predict an oncoming seizure as much as twenty minutes ahead, giving his owner time to get to a safe place. Since learning about Harley, researchers have spent considerable time studying this canine ability to predict a seizure.

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Some experts believe that dogs notice slight changes in a person's behavior during the pre-ictal period before a seizure occurs. Research to date indicates that some dogs are able to detect volatile organic compounds that emit a distinctive

odor prior to a person having a seizure. Dogs display different behaviors in response to the odor. Some become restless, nudging or pawing their owner, going to a nearby person or lying or sitting on their owner to protect them or restrain their movements. In any case, the person has some warning that a seizure is coming and can take action to prevent harm or embarrassment to themselves.

Seizure alert dogs provide freedom for their owner to function in public and travel with greater confidence. People have time to prevent a seizure from occurring or to get to a safe place. The seizure dog can also protect a person having convulsions from injuring themselves, getting up too quickly or being harmed by someone else while they are incapacitated.

Hearing (Signal) Dogs

Hearing dogs are trained to alert their deaf or hearing-impaired handler to important sounds. They may alert in a variety of ways, depending on the situation. They usually use their nose or paw to physically nudge and direct their handler to the source of the sound.

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Their ability to ensure their handler knows if a smoke detector or a security alarm is sounding makes the presence of a well-trained hearing dog potentially lifesaving.

In daily living, hearing dogs are an invaluable asset because they respond to a wide array of sounds. This frees their handler from such things as constantly monitoring the door for a visitor and assures them that they won't sleep through an alarm clock or a smoke detector going off. Even though telephones, oven timers and other devices can be equipped with flashing lights or vibrating pagers, a person must be in the same room to see the light or carry the indicator with them at all times. A signal

dog allows the person to move about more freely in their home. Their ability to ensure their handler knows if a smoke detector or a security alarm is sounding makes the presence of a well-trained hearing dog potentially lifesaving. Additionally, they can help with interpersonal interactions by being trained to alert their handler when someone calls their handler's name or to the sound of a baby or child crying. When out in public, people with hearing dogs have confidence that they will not miss the sound of a siren, a car horn or a bicyclist behind them. Most hearing dogs pick up additional cues over time and will alert to sounds they learn are important to their handler.

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