

Reasons that an autistic person might have a service dog (and, some general service dog education)

First, let's establish what a service dog is and is not. **A service dog is a dog that is trained to perform specific tasks to mitigate and assist with a person's disability.** A service dog is *not* an emotional support animal, or a therapy dog. ESAs are not trained to perform specific tasks, and therapy dogs are basically ESAs for more than one person in a professional setting.

You can't have a service dog if you're not disabled, and a dog isn't a service dog unless it is trained to perform tasks that help the disabled person in ways that are directly related to their disability. Autism is officially classified as a disability, and it can cause significant challenges in daily life. As such, autistic people often benefit from having service dogs.

In the United States, under the ADA, **there is no federal registry for service animals.** This means that there is no documentation required to "prove" that a dog is a service dog. Any company or organization that tries to give you documentation or request that you provide it, is either fraudulent or not acting in accordance with the ADA.

Service dogs are allowed into all public and private establishments, *provided that they are well behaved.*

The only two things that a business owner can ask a service dog handler are: **"Is your dog a service animal required because of a disability?"** and **"What tasks has your dog been trained to perform?"**

If a dog is being disruptive (aggression, loud unnecessary barking that isn't part of an alert, not being toilet trained, etc.) then it is within a business owner's right to ask that the dog be removed from the premises.

There are **very high standards for behavior** among service dogs that all owners, handlers, and trainers are expected to reinforce. Therefore, if a service dog is being disruptive in public, it is not ready for public access.

And remember the golden rule of service dog etiquette: **no touch, no talk, no eye contact.** If you see a working dog in public, don't interact with it. Distracting a service dog can be extremely dangerous for the handler. So **don't** pet a service dog, no matter how cute it is, unless you're friends with the handler and they tell you that you're allowed in that moment.

Now, let's get into some of the tasks service dogs can perform to help autistic people:

- **Deep Pressure Therapy:** lying on top of the person to provide sensory integration and relief from meltdowns & panic attacks.
- **Alerting to the onset of meltdowns, shutdowns, and panic attacks.** This can help in situations where the autistic person might be unaware that they're starting to get overwhelmed, and can make it easier to stop meltdowns before they happen.
- **Going to get help,** for example if the autistic person has entered a shutdown state and is unable to move from an unsafe location, or has self-injured during a meltdown.
- **Leading the person to an exit and/or out of a crowd.** This can be extremely useful in situations where the autistic person has become overstimulated/disoriented to the point of being unable to orient themselves in space or initiate the process of movement.
- **Interrupting self-injurious stims** like skin picking, hair pulling, hitting, biting, etc. This can help reduce harmful stimming by physically blocking the action and encouraging the person to pet the dog instead.
- **Reminding the person to take their medication.** This task is really useful, especially for people who have comorbid ADHD and are often forgetful.
- **Interrupting episodes of "spacing out" that often come along with executive dysfunction.** This can help an autistic person ground themselves and be able to get tasks done more effectively, by having consistent physical reminders from their dog to continue doing a planned task.
- **Picking up and retrieving items that the person has dropped.** This is particularly useful for autistic people who have comorbid dyspraxia and/or ADHD, who often misplace things or drop things due to low muscle tone in their hands.
- **Performing crowd control, by circling around the person as they walk.** This is especially useful for autistic people who get overstimulated in large groups of people. The dog walks around the person, which in turn creates a barrier between the handler and the crowd.
- **Anchoring, to prevent elopement in dangerous situations.** If an autistic person tries to elope (run away) and they are connected to the dog's leash/harness, the dog will lay down firmly and prevent the person from running away. This is especially helpful for autistic people who often run into traffic, into the woods, or into other potentially harmful situations.

As you can see, there are many reasons why an autistic person might have a service dog. Some autistic people also have co-occurring medical conditions, which might make having a service dog a more obvious choice.

Not all autistic people need service dogs. In fact, it's probably the case that **most** autistic people don't need service dogs. Service dogs require a great deal of time, energy, and resources. Some autistic people might not have the money or executive function required to adequately care for a service dog. That's okay, too!

If you're an autistic service dog handler and you'd like to share your experiences, please DM us at @the.autisticats on Instagram :)

~Eden 🐶