

SERVICE DOGS AND AUTISTIC LEARNERS / LEARNERS WITH AUTISM

AUTISM IN EDUCATION

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT



PLEASE NOTE THAT THE AUTHORS SEEK TO ACKNOWLEDGE AND HONOUR BOTH IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE AND PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE. YOU WILL FIND AUTISTIC LEARNERS / LEARNERS WITH AUTISM USED THROUGHOUT THIS PAPER.

BACKGROUND

Autism is a life-long neurodevelopmental condition that affects how people understand and process information, communicate, and interact with others. According to recent data from 2019, about 2% of children in Canada, or 1 in 50 children between the ages of 1 and 17, have autism. The highest rate is among children aged 5 to 11, with 1 in 40, or 2.5%, diagnosed with autism. The rate varies by province, from 0.8% in Saskatchewan to 4.1% in New Brunswick (Canadian Academy of Health Sciences, 2022).

GROWING INTEREST IN AUTISM SERVICE DOGS



Schools continue to work hard to create personalized programs and services to help autistic learners / learners with autism experience success. Families and advocacy groups have called on schools to offer better support for these learners' academic growth and well-being. One area of growing interest is the use of autism assistance dogs in schools to support autistic learners / learners with autism. However, the different terms and ideas around animal-assisted interventions can confuse school staff and families, as they try to make the best decisions based on current research.

TYPES OF ASSISTANCE DOGS

It's important to understand the differences between types of assistance dogs:

- **Service dogs** are specially trained to help a person with tasks they can't do or have difficulty doing. These dogs only assist the person they are trained to support. The person also receives training to work with the dog. Service dogs can usually go anywhere their owner is allowed.
- **Therapy dogs** are trained to help many people and work in settings like hospitals, clinics, or schools for a set period. Their handler controls the dog during visits.
- **Emotional support dogs** are not trained to perform specific tasks like service dogs, but they do provide comfort for people with mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression. A doctor's letter is required for a dog to be recognized as an emotional support animal, but these animals are not recognized as service dog under current Canadian law.
- **Psychiatric service dogs** help people with mental health conditions like depression or PTSD. These dogs are trained to perform tasks related to their owner's psychiatric disability. Psychiatric service dogs fall under the same legal considerations as service dogs in Canada.



AUTISM ASSISTANCE DOGS

Autism assistance dogs are a type of service dog specially trained to help autistic individuals / individuals with autism. Their main role is to help keep learners safe by preventing them from running or wandering off. These dogs can also help with behavioural regulation, reduce stress and anxiety, and support routines. They can also help learners engage with others and feel less isolated. In schools, these dogs can help autistic learners / learners with autism participate in class and other school activities (Guerin, 2020; Leighton et al., 2023; O’Haire, 2017; Tseng, 2023).

The dogs respond to commands from their handler, who could be the learner, a caregiver, or a teacher. The handler is responsible for the dog’s care, including training, feeding, and exercise. If the learner isn’t the handler, the parent or guardian may act as a link between the learner and the dog. The school team must decide who will care for the dog while it’s at school.

LAWS AND POLICIES

In Canada, schools are starting to recognize that service dogs, including autism assistance dogs, may be an important part of helping autistic learners / learners with autism. If a service dog is needed, it can be included in a learner’s Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Each province has laws to protect people with disabilities, including those who use service dogs. Some provinces have extra laws that make specific rules for people with guide or assistance animals. For example, the Alberta Service Dogs Act (2009) requires service dogs to be trained by an accredited school and have an official ID card. Nova Scotia’s Service Dog Act (2016) requires that service dog teams have access to public places.

Many school boards have created their own guidelines for using service dogs in schools. These guidelines cover things like who takes care of the dog, how learners and staff should interact with it, and how the dog’s needs will be met.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SERVICE DOGS IN SCHOOLS

When deciding whether a service dog is appropriate for autistic learners / learners with autism, schools need to consider many things:



- Educating staff and students about the role and rules for interacting with the dog.
- Health concerns, like allergies to dogs.
- The wellbeing of students who are afraid of dogs.
- Cultural considerations related to dogs in the school.
- The training and certification of the service dog.
- Who will handle the dog if the learner is unable to manage it.
- Ongoing training for handlers.
- Caring for the dog during school hours.
- Transportation for the dog and learner.
- Legal responsibility if harm happens, either to the dog or another person.
- Communication with visitors about the dog's presence in school.
- Boards/districts/regions should have a process for data collection regarding requests for service dogs including the number of requests made, description of the services provided by the dog to support the learner's educational program, number of requests accepted and denied (and why).

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The number of requests for autism assistance dogs in schools has increased as families and schools look for ways to better support autistic learners / learners with autism. While research on the benefits of autism service dogs has grown over the past 15 years, there still are not enough well-designed scientific studies to consider the use of service dogs for autistic learners / learners with autism an evidence-based practice. Autism assistance dogs have been used to improve safety, help learners with social interactions, offer comfort in stressful situations, reduce running away, lesson self-harm, and decrease aggression. Social interaction is the area where autism assistance dogs have shown the most positive effects.

This research snapshot is intended to highlight some of the issues that may affect decision-making concerning service dogs as an accommodation in schools for autistic learners / learners with autism. It should, in no way, be considered a legal opinion. It is recommended that boards/districts/regions develop or clarify guidelines to support school teams in decision making, and individual jurisdictions should seek legal advice as they consider developing policy and guidelines to address this issue.

