Service Animals in Elementary Classrooms: Examining Educator and Family Perspectives of a Working Service Animal in an Elementary Classroom

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Abstract

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law in 1990 by President Bush. Although the ADA includes laws about public access rights for people with disabilities and their service animals, many schools are reluctant to have service animals (that are partnered with children with disabilities) included in early childhood classrooms. Teachers that have had experience with working animals in their elementary classrooms have reported many benefits, not only for the student with a disability, but for the other students in the classroom as well. Research on dogs in classrooms has shown potential social, behavioral, and academic improvements in students. However, many parents of children with service animals have reported facing significant challenges when attempting to integrate their child’s service animal into their classroom environment. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of early childhood educators who have had or who may have service animals in their classrooms.
Americans with Disabilities Act

On July 26th, 1990 the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law by President George H.W. Bush. The purpose of ADA is to ensure that persons with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as every other American. ADA is defined as a civil law that “prohibits discrimination and guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in the mainstream of American life -- to enjoy employment opportunities, to purchase goods and services, and to participate in State and local government programs and services” (ADA.gov website). In 2010 and 2011, ADA was further revised to include specific final regulations regarding service animals. Originally under ADA any trained animal that provided assistance to an individual with a disability was considered a service animal and allowed public access rights (“Commonly asked,” 2008). However, beginning March 15, 2011 ADA revised the definition of a service animal to only recognize dogs as service animals (U.S Department of Justice, 2011). Although much of American society associates the term service dog with guide dogs for the blind, service animals can provide a wide range of tasks for their handler. Examples of tasks include, but are not limited to, retrieval work for individuals in need of mobility assistance, alerting individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing to sounds, alerting an individual with allergies to the presence of an allergen, assisting an individual during a seizure, providing physical support for individuals in need of mobility assistance, disrupting behaviors or helping persons with psychiatric and neurological disabilities by preventing harmful behaviors (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012).
Emotional Support Animals, Service Dogs, and Therapy Dogs

Many Americans confuse the terms Emotional Support Animals, Therapy Dogs, and Service Animals. Emotional support animals and therapy dogs differ from service dogs as they are not trained in any specific task, and only provide comfort to an individual by being with that person ("Frequently asked," 2015). Most emotional support dogs provide comfort to a specific partner, while most therapy dogs are utilized to provide comfort to other individuals, often people other than their owner. Often times ESA's are confused with psychiatric service animals. According to ADA, if a dog has been trained to sense an anxiety attack and take specific action to prevent or lessen its impact then it is qualified as a service animal. However, if merely the dog's presence provides comfort and it performs no specific task to aid the handler, then it is not considered a service animal ("Frequently asked," 2015). It is important to note that therapy animals as well as ESAs do not have public access rights. However, under the Fair Housing Act and section 504, housing providers must make reasonable accommodations for any person with a disability with an assistance animal, including an ESA (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013). Should a person have a disability which requires a service animal or an ESA, the housing provider must make an exception to any pet restrictions unless the specific animal poses a threat to the health and safety of others that cannot be reduced or eliminated by other accommodations, or if the specific animal would cause substantial physical damage to another's property (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013).

4 Paws for Ability

ADA does not require service dogs to be trained by a professional organization; owners have the right to train their own dogs ("Frequently asked," 2015). However, many people choose
to use an accredited organization to train a service dog. One such organization is 4 Paws for Ability, located in Xenia, Ohio. According to their website 4 Paws for Ability is a nonprofit 501 (c) (3) organization whose mission is to “place quality service dogs with children with disabilities and veterans who have lost use of limbs or hearing; help with animal rescue, and educate the public regarding use of service dogs in public places” (4pawsforability.org). 4 Paws for Ability was founded in 1998 by Karen Shirk after she tried unsuccessfully for years to find an agency that would place a dog with her. After most agencies deemed her “too disabled” or “not disabled enough” Karen decided to get her own puppy and worked with a trainer to train her first service dog, Ben (4 Paws, 2016). After experiencing the comfort and peace of having Ben to assist her, and even save her life, Karen dreamed of starting her own agency where anyone in need could be placed with a service dog. In October of 1998, 4 Paws for Ability was started in a 2 bedroom apartment with only 2 dogs. 4 Paws filled a void by primarily focusing on children as candidates for service dogs (children are often turned down by other agencies for being too young) (4 Paws, 2016). 4 Paws is now the largest service dog organization that places dogs with children, and the only organization that has no age requirement for receiving a dog. On January 17th, 2016 4 Paws had the grand opening of their new 19,000 square foot training center and kennel, a multi-million dollar facility designed to promote further growth for 4 Paws and meet the needs of the staff, dogs, and families who receive dogs (Matthews, 2016). 4 Paws now places approximately 100 trained service dogs a year, and is on track to place their 1000th dog March 2016 (4PawPrints, 2016). According to the 4 Paws 2014 annual report, 4 Paws has placed 8 different types of specialized service dogs. These dogs include: autism assistance, diabetic alert, seizure alert, fetal alcohol syndrome disorder assistance, mobility assistance, multipurpose assistance, multipurpose assistance with seizure alert, and veteran’s service dogs (4 Paws annual
report, 2015). 4 Paws places dogs in all 50 states and worldwide. At the end of 2014, 4 Paws had approximately 25 dogs placed in countries other than the United States (4 Paws annual report, 2015). According to the 4 Paws for Ability website, 4 Paws boasts an overall 98 percent success rate in placements with a 90 percent success rate in the first dog placed in the home, and an overall success rate of 98 percent (4 Paws, 2016).

4 Paws Breeding Program

Since its founding 4 Paws has transitioned from using primarily rescue dogs to having a breeding program of their own. Research completed by PAWS, a nonprofit pet rescue and rehabilitation organization, shows that breeding dogs in a secured breeding program is the only way to secure successful placements. Their program found that success rates increased from about 12.5 percent when using shelter dogs to approximately 75 percent when using dogs from a structured breeding program (Breeders are best, 2016). 4 Paws CEO, Karen Shirk, has mentioned in an interview for the 4 Paws bimonthly newsletter that she originally envisioned 4 Paws training rescues to become service dogs. When selecting a dog to become a service animal one must select a dog of the highest quality. Shirk said after a few years of using rescue dogs she quickly realized that the process was not cost effective nor was it practical (4PawPrints, 2015). With research in mind 4 Paws created a breeding program of their own which now includes over 100 breeder dogs that live in guardian homes with local volunteers who will eventually adopt the dogs as they retire from the program (4PawPrints, 2016). In the May/June issue of the PawPrints newsletter issued by 4 Paws, Shirk explained the science behind the 4 Paws breeding program. “We devote much time and effect to perfecting our breeding programs. What types of breeds we use and why we breed them is always reviewed in the meetings we have. To date these are the breeds we use and a small piece of information on each. It is interesting to note that some are
mixed breed dogs that are purpose bred” (4PawPrints, 2015). The most popular breeds of 4 Paws include, but are not limited to, Golden Retrievers, Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retriever and Standard Poodle mixes (goldendoodles), Golden Retrievers and Labrador Retriever mixes (golden labs), and Papillions. Each breed has specific advantages that can be considered when selecting a breed for training. For example, 4 Paws has found that English Labs have proven to be tougher than Golden Retrievers and excel when placed with children who are a little more rough when playing (Matthews, 2016). By mixing breeds such as the Golden Retriever and the Standard Poodle 4 Paws is able to create a more well-rounded service dog. In the case of the goldendoodle, most often the dog has the personality and strength of the golden while also being more hypoallergenic like a Standard Poodle (4PawPrints, 2015).

Mission Pawsible

The puppies in training are raised at 4 Paws and are treated as future service animals form day 1. After a few months of age, some of the puppies are placed in foster homes to be socialized. Most dogs, however, are sent through the 4 Paws prison program, also known as Mission Pawsible. 4 Paws for Ability collaborates with 5 prisons in the surrounding area: Warren Correctional Institute, Lebanon Correctional Institute, Lebanon Camp, Pickaway Correctional Institute, and London Correctional Institute (4 Paws, 2016). Only inmates who have earned high merit status are eligible to foster a puppy in their cell. Once approved, a young puppy is placed with 2 inmates who live in the same cell. One of those inmates is with the dog at all times, and both people work with a 4 Paws trainer to learn how to work with the dog and prepare them for their life as a service dog (4 Paws, 2016). Each puppy in prison spends about 6 weeks with their inmates and then 2 weeks out in public socialization with 4 Paws staff. Through this program the puppy are able to learn basic obedience such as potty training and simple commands.
Experienced inmates are sometimes able to work with their puppies on more advanced skills that may help the dog once they are placed with their child as well as teach the dogs fun tricks to help the dog's future child bond with the dog more easily (4 Paws, 2016). According to their website, the 4 Paws staff recognizes the Mission Pawsible program as a valuable asset to the puppy raising process. They claim the stress produced in prison actually helps their dogs deal with more stressful placements. For example, a dog that went through the prison program will be more successful than a dog that stayed at 4 Paws when placed with a child who has autism and experiences frequent stressful meltdowns (4 Paws, 2016). Other possible benefits of the prison program include allowing the dog a chance to form an individual bond with a human, allowing an inmate to better their world by donating their time to a charitable cause, providing pet therapy to inmates, and exposing the puppies to a wide variety of people by allowing the puppies to visit the mental health wings of the prisons (4 Paws, 2016).

Traditional Fostering

After completing basic obedience through the 4 Paws prison program, most dogs are placed in foster homes. The two types of fosters are traditional family foster homes and university foster homes. To be considered for a traditional foster home a person must live within 3 hours of 4 Paws and be willing to socialize a future service dog (4 Paws, 2016). The university foster program was started at Wittenberg University, but continues to spread to other nearby universities. Currently, there are 9 official 4 Paws college programs located at Wittenberg University, the University of Kentucky, Wright State University, Miami University, The Ohio State University, Cedarville University, College of Wooster, Manchester University, and Ohio Northern University. Other schools that have hosted 4 paws dogs include: Sinclair Community College, Morehead State University, University of Dayton, Franklin University, and Eastern
Kentucky University (4 Paws, 2016). Both traditional fosters and university fosters have similar responsibilities, to socialize the dogs to as many people and places as possible, work with a trainer to help prepare the dogs for a life in service, and fill out paperwork regarding the dog’s personality, strengths, and weaknesses. From my personal experience as an officer of the Wright State chapter of the 4 Paws College program I have learned that every college program differs in their setup and approach to the program. For example, the University of Kentucky program hosts between 15 and 30 dogs per semester, only accept 1-2 fosters per dog, and accept a multitude of puppy sitters to help with the responsibilities of the puppies. At Wright State every team is composed of 3 college students all working together to help one dog. Typically one student is considered the foster of the dog, this is the home where the dog stays overnight, and the other students are considered co-handlers, they take the dog during the day. From personal experience I have learned that many colleges have specific rules about who can apply to be a part of the 4 Paws program and many colleges do not allow the puppies to live in on-campus housing. At Wright State the puppies are welcome to live with students in on-campus apartments, but are not allowed in the dormitories due to possible allergy issues. Additionally, any student at Wright State is eligible to apply for an interview to handle a 4 Paws dog in training. This semester there are exactly 100 dogs placed in colleges. In college the puppies have the opportunity to attend college classes as well as visit other public places and become accustomed to wearing their equipment and having designated “work time” and play time. Both traditional and college fosters are required to fill out various weekly, biweekly, and monthly forms focused on the places the dog went, the dog’s personality, and the dog’s strengths and weaknesses (4 Paws, 2016). From my experience, college fosters typically receive puppies from around 3 months to 8 months in age and keep the dogs for an entire semester. Traditional fosters have the option of receiving
their puppy at a younger age and they keep their dog until approximately 9 to 12 months of age when the dog is ready for advanced training (4 Paws, 2016).

Advanced Training

The advanced training process involves a dog working individually with a 4 Paws for Ability trainer to become task-trained. 4 Paws trains a variety of different tasks for dogs, sometimes training a dog in more than one skill. The types of service dogs trained by 4 Paws include: Autism Assistance, Hearing Alert, Diabetic Alert, Seizure Alert, Mobility Assistance, Veterans Assistance, FASD Assistance, Facilitated Guide Dog, and Multi-Purpose Assistance (4 Paws, 2016).

Placement

4 Paws places service dogs with children in classes every month. In the year 2015 4 Paws placed 103 working service animals (4 Paws for ability annual report 2015). 4 Paws boasts a 90 percent success rate for first time placements, with an overall success rate of 98 percent (2015 press kit). Many of the families of service animals plan to have their child attend school with the service animal. Some families have success integrating their service dog into their child’s education, other families struggle and have even had to take legal measures to try and integrate their working dog with their child’s education.
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Methods

I began my research by interviewing an employee of 4 Paws for Ability. The interview was conducted through email and involved asking the employee questions about the process that 4 Paws follows to breed, train, and place service animals with children with disabilities. I then configured two separate surveys through the online platform Google Forms. Survey 1 was created for parents of children with service animals. The survey included questions about the respondent’s specific animal and about their child’s education situation. Questions were also included about the family’s experience with the school and their child’s teacher. I created a second survey via Google Forms to gain knowledge about educator perspectives of service animals in elementary classrooms. Survey 2 included informational questions about the respondent’s educational role, their experience with pet dogs and service animals, and their personal opinion about having a service animal in their elementary classroom. I gathered responses for survey 1 and survey 2 through an online platform. After the survey was sent out I received 15 responses for survey 1 and 17 responses for survey 2.

Results

Of the 15 responses for survey 1 the service animals were varied in their trained tasks. Six people responded saying they faced challenges when trying to integrate their child’s service animal into school. 2 of the challenges involved the school paying for the service animal’s handler. All 15 reported positive changes in their child’s behavior and school performance since the time their child’s dog began attending school with the child. 12 respondents reported that their child’s teacher was very welcoming to the service animal in the classroom, 2 said the
teachers were apprehensive at first but then welcoming after the dog began attending school, and
I reported that the teacher was apprehensive of the dog attending school.

I received responses from teachers in 4 different states. All 17 of the respondents reported
that they had experience owning a pet dog. 41.7% reported that they had a general understanding
of service dog laws/ADA laws, 17.6% said they were familiar with service animal laws, but do
not know the laws about service animals in schools, 23.5% reported that they know the laws
about service animals, and 5.9% said they do not know service dog laws. 12 teachers responded
saying that they would feel very comfortable having a service dog in their elementary classroom.
5 teachers responded saying they would feel fairly comfortable having a service dog in the
classroom. Some teachers noted that they would be comfortable except for the potential of
allergy concerns; another said it would depend on the dog and its training. Only one of the 17
teachers did not know that service animals can be trained for a variety of tasks. All 17 teachers
reported that there is not a specific “type” of service dog that would make them more or less
comfortable with having a service animal in the classroom. Possible concerns that teachers had
included: parents not having knowledge of laws, students that may be afraid of dogs, young
students that may need help with the dog going outside, students having dog allergies, the dog
initially being a distraction to learners, the dog potentially being under-trained, and finding the
time/way to let the dog outside. 4 teachers said that their experience with a service animal in the
classroom was not only positive for the student with the dog, but also positive for the other
students in the class. There were no negative comments about experiences with service animals
in the classroom.
How much do you know about service dog laws or ADA laws about public access rights of service animals?

- I am familiar with service animal laws, but do not know the laws about service animals in schools
- I know the laws about service animals
- I have a general idea of the public access laws about service animals
- I do not know about service animal laws
- Other

Conclusion

My research results allowed for a better understanding of the elementary educator’s perspective on having a service animal in the classroom and the overall impact a service animal can have on a child when integrated into the elementary classroom. My purpose for completing this research was to examine an educator’s view of having a service animal in their classroom as well as examine the experiences of parents/teachers who have experienced an in-classroom experience of a service animal and an elementary student. Overall the educators that had experience with service animals in their classrooms were very positive about the dog’s impact on the child, the impact of the dog on other students in the classroom and the classroom environment, and the possibility of having another service dog in the classroom in the future. One reason I believe the results showed such positive responses from elementary educators is the considered bias of the population of respondents. Every teacher that responded to the survey had experience with a pet dog. There is a strong possibility that an elementary educator with pet
experience was much more likely to participate in the survey than an educator with limited or no pet experience. This could contribute to the person’s level of comfort with having a service animal in their classroom. I believe the results were considerably positive because of the research proven benefits of a highly-trained service animal when matched with a student with disabilities. Every teacher reported that the service animal in their classroom was trained by a credible organization. Research completed at Valparaiso University examined the potential benefits of service animals working with primary and secondary students. This research found that service animals not only provide the medical benefits of performing their trained tasks, but can also provide social benefits and improve the quality of life for the student with disabilities and their family (Huss, 2011). Research published in the Anthrozoos A Multidisciplinary Journal of The Interactions of People & Animals provided evidence that the presence of a dog in a classroom decreased aggressiveness and stress in students, promoted student social cohesiveness, and increased student attentiveness to the teacher (Behavioral effects, 2003). The teachers that positive experiences with service animals in their classroom noted similar benefits in their classroom. One teacher wrote “She adds a calming effect to the classroom. She helps relieve stress during testing and in general.” Responses from survey 2 supported the same conclusion. One parent reported that the classroom staff reported more independence in their child since the service dog started attending school. When asked how their child’s school experience has changed since the dog joined the classroom one respondent wrote “it’s been a miracle, no more self harm behaviors, no more meltdowns, no more dropping to the floor and transitions have now become commonplace rather than catastrophic ordeals.” Another included He no longer elopes, has conversations with peers and staff about his dog, he’s behaviors improve with the support of his service dog. He’s a happier kid who loves his dogs companionship. He tolerates the bus ride
home now and can go out in public such as field trips and such.” Overall most parents reported that the teacher of the classroom was comfortable and welcoming to the dog. However, 6 of the 15 respondents reported that they faced challenges integrating the service animal into the classroom setting. Based on the results of survey 1 and 2 I believe most families face challenges with the administration of the school rather than the classroom teachers. To find if the challenges of having service animals in elementary classrooms lies with the administration of the school I could extend my research to include surveys of principals and school board members to determine their perspective and education on having service animals in classrooms.
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