

Dog Companionship & its Benefits to Humans

Dogs (*Canis familiaris*) have been “man’s best friends” since the beginning of time. This timeless relationship continues to evolve into new kinds of human-dog interactions that increasingly benefits society.

Traditionally, dogs have aided humans in tasks such as hunting, livestock herding, and guarding. However, as society moved from small rural communities to increasingly large metropolitan areas, the roles of dogs have changed. Throughout the years, dogs located missing persons and assisted in rescue operations in the aftermath of disasters such as earthquakes and bomb explosions. Dogs participate in law enforcement activities and have been particularly successful in detecting narcotics. Dogs even served, along with soldiers, in patrol assignments during World War II and the Vietnam War (Figure 1). Today, dog companionship has taken on a new meaning as Americans increasingly consider their dogs another member of the family rather than just property.

More than 77.8 million American households own one or more dogs (APPA, 2015-2016). Furthermore, according to a public opinion poll, the majority of dog owners cited companionship as the main reason for having a dog (Jones, 2007). After all, dogs are nonjudgmental, give unconditional love, can be trusted with our most intimate feelings and emotions, and are highly intelligent; hence, highly trainable to do almost anything. These dog characteristics can enhance the lives of thousands of youths and adults, especially those with disabilities and/or those who live in continuing care facilities.

According to the 2013 state report issued by Cornell University’s Employment and Disability Institute, 14.9% or 409,700 of the 2,743,200 individuals ages 21 to 64 in Alabama reported at least one disability. Of this total, 15.3% or 217,100 of the 1,420,100 females of all ages



Figure 1. Currently dogs serve in a variety of roles with the armed forces.

and 14.6% or 192,600 of the 1,323,100 males of all ages in Alabama reported one or more disabilities. Furthermore, 19.6% that reported ambulatory difficulty live in group quarters such as rehabilitation centers, shelters, and nursing homes.

By embracing *Canis familiaris*, residents in rehabilitation and learning centers and nursing homes, patients in hospitals, and families in general feel comfort, stimulus, joy and respect for all living beings. In addition, dog companionship has been shown to provide other benefits that can improve the quality of life of many more thousands of Alabamians. This publication examines the physical, physiological, and psychological benefits of dog companionship.

Dogs for the Visually, Hearing & Physically Impaired

The guide dog for the visually impaired is the most well-known type of companion dog. However, these dogs are legally defined by federal law (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990) as service animals. For example, guide dogs are trained to enhance the mobility and independence of blind men and women.



Figure 2. Service dogs for the physically and/or emotionally disabled are trained to increase mobility and independence.

Working in and outside the house, together with other social activities can now be attained with the aid of these highly trained dogs. The law states that guide dogs are allowed everywhere the general public is allowed, including restaurants, stores, and all places of public accommodation that have a "no pets" policy.

Hearing dogs are trained to help people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. These dogs alert a person with a hearing impairment to various sounds such as a smoke alarm, an alarm clock, the telephone ring, another person, the doorbell, knocks at the door, a baby crying, and sirens.

Service dogs (Figure 2) for the physically disabled are trained to increase the mobility and independence of people who use wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, or canes. These dogs perform such varied tasks as pulling wheelchairs, retrieving items that are dropped, turning light switches off and on, opening and closing doors and drawers, carrying items by mouth or in backpacks, and helping the person rise from sitting or fallen positions. In addition, a number of empirical studies have demonstrated that the presence of a companion dog serves to increase the quantity and quality of attention directed toward the physically handicapped people by both familiar individuals and strangers (National Institutes of Health, 1987). This "magnet" effect of companion dogs can be of great benefit to the handicapped individuals because it reduces the tendency to be avoided or ignored by non-handicapped people.

These dogs can also be of great benefit to people with disabilities associated with

arthritis, ataxia (poor balance), multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, and chronic pain. As with guide dogs, most states are allowing service dogs for the physically handicapped full access to public places.

Dogs for the visually, hearing, and physically impaired can be obtained through established organizations or individual trainers. However, the latter may be difficult to locate. Some established organizations in the United States and Canada provide skilled dogs trained at various centers.



Figure 3. The golden retriever is a favorite dog breed that is used to enhance the lives of people with disabilities and/or living in continuing care facilities. Photo by Janelle Vreugdehil, Wiki

Most of their dogs come from their own selective breeding programs that primarily use American Kennel Club (AKC) registered purebred Labrador retrievers and golden retrievers (Figure 3) selected for their excellent temperament, intelligence, and health. However, some organizations successfully use Pembroke Welsh corgis (Figure 4), German shepherds (Figure 5), and



Figure 4. The Pembroke Welsh Corgi is also an affectionate dog that works well in therapy programs. Photo by Pmuths1956, Wiki



Figure 5. The German shepherd has been used to aid people with disabilities, in dog-assisted therapy, and for specialized protection. Photo by Ellen Levy Finch, Wiki

mixed-breeds (dogs that do not possess a known lineage) (Figure 6) from animal shelters.



Figure 6. Mixed breeds from animal shelters have been used very successfully as hearing dogs.

Dog-Assisted Therapy

Basically, therapy dogs try to normalize the institutional experience by providing emotional support (Figure 7). Although these dogs are not legally defined by federal law, they visit hospitals, nursing homes, schools for mentally retarded children and adults, and other facilities or institutions.

Therapy dogs have been tremendously successful, especially in the areas of physical rehabilitation and psychological recovery. For example, the presence of animals in

institutional settings is associated with the tendency of older persons to smile and talk more, reach out toward people and objects, exhibit more alertness and attention, and experience more symptoms of well-being and less depression (National Institutes of Health, 2009). These studies have proven pet programs superior in producing psychosocial benefits compared to some other alternative therapies such as arts and crafts programs, friendly visitor programs, and conventional psychotherapy. Furthermore, the introduction of dogs in visitation programs in children's hospitals around the country has met with great success. By developing a bond with the dog, the patient may achieve documentable progress toward therapeutic goals and have a very heart-warming and memorable experience. This is true especially for people living in continuing care facilities. After all, sometimes it is nice to have someone to hold and to talk to.

In order for a therapy dog to perform effectively it must have obedience training, a calm and nonaggressive temperament, and good health. To be obedience trained the dog must be able to:

- Walk beside the handler.
- "Sit," "lay down," and "stand" on command and "stay" until released from command.
- Come quickly when called and "sit" on the left side of the handler and wait for the next command.

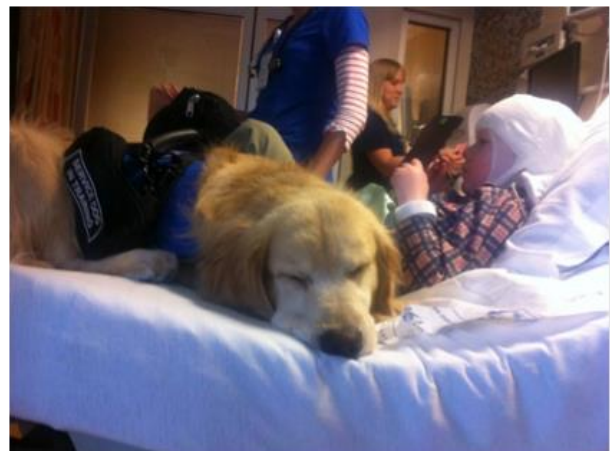


Figure 7. Although therapy dogs are not legally defined by federal law, they are allowed to visit hospitals to provide emotional support. Photo by Zipster969, Wiki

In addition, these dogs must also feel comfortable in the presence of wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, oxygen tanks, food carts, and any other equipment patients and therapists may use.

Although the golden retriever (Figure 3) and the Labrador retriever are among the favorite breeds used in dog-assisted therapy programs, breeds such as the collie (Figure 8), German shepherd (Figure 5), and Pembroke Welsh Corgi (Figure 4) have been used successfully. Unfortunately, not every dog can be a therapy dog.



Figure 8. The collie has been successful in dog-assisted therapy programs. Photo by Sannise, Wiki

National organizations that certify dogs and their handlers include The Delta Society and Therapy Dogs International, Inc. All dogs accepted into Delta Society's Pet Partners program must pass a two-part screening of skills and aptitude before certification. To be certified by Therapy Dogs International, Inc., dogs and handlers must pass the fairly rigorous Canine Good Citizen Test, sponsored by the American Kennel Club (AKC). Patients and staff should have the option of not participating in dog-assisted therapy.

Other Services and Benefits of Dog Companionship

- A dog may be the solution for victims of abusive spouses or stalkers, especially if a gun is not an option because of children in the home. A dog can be trained to react to threats against the owner and immediate family. The German shepherd (Figure 5) is one of the most popular breeds used for protection.
- A dog can be a benefit in emergencies for those with disabilities associated with seizure disorders. Researchers at the University of Florida reported that some dogs have an innate ability to alert and/or respond to seizures (Dalziel et al., 2003).
- A companion dog, according to medical research, can lower a person's blood pressure and mitigate the effects of loneliness. The Australian People and Pets Survey of 2006 shows that dog owners, compared to non-pet owners, are more physically active, visit the doctor less often, less likely to take medication for high blood pressure, and are less likely to report feeling lonely. Therefore, those who own dogs can expect health cost savings, both to households and government, in addition to enjoying the companionship of the family pet.
- A dog can enhance self-esteem and feelings of competence in older children, as well as improve motivation, when given the responsibility for its exercise, training, and feeding. This is true especially among those considered at risk. It has also been suggested that exposure to pets should facilitate the establishment and maintenance of relationships with peers, especially in grade and high school (NIH, 1987). Families can spend quality time and share memorable moments by having their youths participate in many dog-related activities that offer safe fun and recreation. Some of these activities include the following:

Obedience Trials: Dogs are required to retrieve articles, jump fences, and do heeling patterns. It's a great way to win titles, and best of all, have wondrous fun with "their" dogs.

Frisbee Competitions: Dogs catching a flying disc (commonly called Frisbee) can become a "prize worth working for," while enjoying the outdoors in a healthy and fun youth-dog adventure.

Flyball Tournaments: They consist of a relay type of sport where dogs race over a series of jumps, fetch balls from a ball-box and race back to the start so that the next dog in the relay team continues to run the course.

Agility Trials: These types of contests display the dog's ability to take commands, as to where to go on an obstacle course made up of jumps, tunnels, catwalks, and A-frames. Testing the dog's ability is a great and healthy way to have fun.

Dog Care

Owners must understand that choosing to share their homes and lives with one or more dogs means keeping their end of the bargain. In other words, together with the joy that comes from owning a dog, certain things must be done to secure a happy and healthy animal. Regular veterinary checkups, optimal nutrition and protection against injuries are extremely important.

Additionally, having their male dog neutered or their female dog spayed is not "cruel." In fact, it is much healthier and beneficial to the dog. For the male dog it means fewer problems with the prostate gland and lower rates of testicular cancer, while for the female dog it means fewer chances of ovarian cancer and uterine infections. Most important, neutering or spaying your dog will contribute to solving the pet overpopulation problem.

Dog-owner education in the areas of health, nutrition, and training is necessary to increase the chance that both dog and owner will remain together for the rest of the natural life of the dog. Tables 1-5 provide additional dog care information.

Table 1

Facts about Dogs

Parameter	Answer
Class	Mammal
Body Temperature	100 to 102.5 degrees F
Resting Pulse Rate	60 to 140 beats/minute
Respiration Rate	10 to 30 breaths/minute
Vision	Dichromatic (detect two colors: blue and green)
Reach Puberty	6 to 9 months
Length of Estrous Cycle	8 months
Length of Gestation	63 to 65 days
Weaning Time	7 to 8 weeks of age
Order	Carnivore
Dentition	Temporary teeth erupt at about 20 days of age and a full set of 42 permanent teeth are fully erupted by 6 months of age.
Digestive System	Monogastric system

Table 2

Dog Vaccination Schedule

Age	Vaccine
5 to 8 Weeks	DHLPPC (Distemper, Hepatitis, Leptospirosis, Parainfluenza, Parvovirus, and Coronavirus)
12 to 14 Weeks	DHLPPC booster
16 to 18 Weeks	DHLPPC booster
5 to 6 Months	Rabies
Annually (Adults)	DHLPPC and Rabies (consult your veterinarian for the right vaccination schedule)

Table 3

Most Common Parasites in Dogs

Type	Parasite
Internal	Heartworm, Roundworm, Hookworm, Whipworm, Tapeworm, Coccidia
External	Flea, Tick, Mange Mite

Table 4

Guidelines for Selecting Foods and Feeding Dogs

Make sure the label has the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) guarantee
Look for meat (beef, chicken, turkey or lamb) as the first ingredient, rice as the main grain in the formula, and mixed tocopherols (vitamin E) as preservatives
Be certain that the food has an expiration date, and that it has not turned rancid
Store food in a sealed container in a cool dry place
Feed the dog according to correct body weight and condition, and consider factors such as growth, adult maintenance, gestation, lactation, level of activity and age
When changing foods, mix 1/4 of the new food to 3/4 of the old food, and increase gradually to prevent gastric upsets
Watch the dog's stool, weight, and coat when changing foods
Make sure the dog has fresh water at all times

Table 5

Dog Obedience Exercises

All work must be with the dog on a leash
Require the dog to walk beside you
Sit and stay require the dog to sit in the same spot while you leave or stand six feet away for one minute, then return and release the dog from the stay command
Down and stay require the dog to lay down and stay in the down position for three minutes and stand six feet away until time is up, then return and release the dog from the stay command
Stand and stay require the dog to stay standing without moving its feet while you circle the dog or leave and stand six feet away, then return the dog to the heeling position and release the dog from the stay command
Recall and finish require the dog to sit six feet away from you and make sure the dog comes quickly to you and heel when called

Guevara (1999)

Conclusion

Companion dogs do not remedy all the difficulties posed by a disability. However, they can provide the physical and psychological support needed to move a person towards independence, and somewhat improve their daily life. This includes guiding and alerting people with impaired vision or hearing, retrieving dropped items for the physically challenged, and/or just providing joy and comfort.

More recently, the concept of dogs in healthcare facilities has evolved into dog-assisted therapy programs in which trained dogs help patients achieve documentable progress toward therapeutic goals. These programs have been tremendously

successful, especially in the areas of physical rehabilitation and psychological/emotional recovery. Medical research has determined that contact with dogs can lower blood pressure and fend off heart attacks. Increasingly, therefore, the elderly have embraced *Canis familiaris*.

Other benefits companion dogs have been shown to provide are:

- Decreased feelings of anxiety, stress and isolation
- Increased self-esteem, sense of responsibility and competence in older children
- Enhanced respect for all living beings

Moreover, dog-related activities enable families to spend quality time together, while setting different goals for their four-legged buddies.

Table 6 lists national and state organizations that are dedicated to promoting the physical and emotional well-being of people through mutually beneficial and safe interaction with dogs.

Table 6

National & State Organizations

American Kennel Club

8051 Arco Corporate Drive, Suite 100
Raleigh, NC 27617-3390
Phone: (919) 233-9767
www.akc.org

Birmingham Kennel Club, Inc.

109 Clark Street
Pelham, AL 35124
205 982-7552
www.birminghamkc.org

Canine Companions for Independence

P. O. Box 446
Santa Rosa, CA 95402-0446
National Headquarters:
Phone: 1-866-CCI-DOGS (224-3647)
Toll free: 1-800-572-BARK (2275)
http://www.cci.org

Canine Partners for Life

P.O. Box 170
Cochranville, PA 19330
Physical Address
334 Faggs Manor Road
Cochranville, PA 19330
(610) 869-4902
http://k94life.org

Pet Partners (Delta Society)

875 124th Ave NE, Suite 101
Bellevue, WA 98005
(425) 679-5500
www.deltasociety.org
https://petpartners.org/

Dogs for the Deaf, Inc.

10175 Wheeler Rd.
Central Point, OR 97502
(541) 826-9220 (V/TDD)
www.dogsforthe deaf.org

Dog Ears

4200 East Britton Road
Oklahoma City, OK 73131
(405) 478-2303

Fidos For Freedom, Inc.

1200 Sandy Spring Road
Laurel, MD 20707 (410)
880-4178
www.fidosforfreedom.org

Guide Dogs of America

13445 Glenoaks Blvd.
Sylmar, CA 91342
(818) 362-5834
www.guidedogs of america.org

Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc.

P.O. Box 151200
San Rafael, CA 94915-1200
(800) 295-4050
www.guidedogs.com

Guiding Eyes for the Blind

611 Granite Springs Rd.
Yorktown Heights, NY 10598
(800) 942-0149
www.guiding-eyes.org

Greater Huntsville Humane Society

2812 Johnson Road
Huntsville, AL 35805
(256) 881-8081
https://www.ghhs.org/

Hand-in-Paw, Inc.

617 38th Street South
Birmingham, AL 35222
Phone: 205.322.5144
www.handinpaw.org

Humane Society of the Tennessee Valley

P.O. Box 51723
Knoxville, TN 37950
Physical Address:
6717 Kingston Pike
Knoxville, TN 37919
865-573-9675 (423) 573-9675
http://humanesocietytennessee.com/

Huntsville Animal Services

4950 Triana Boulevard South
Huntsville, AL 35805 (256) 883-3783
http://www.hsvcity.com/animal/index.html

Huntsville Obedience Training Club

131 Export Circle
Huntsville, AL 35806
(256) 852-4377
http://www.hotc.org/Home.aspx

International Association of Assistance Dog Partners

38691 Filly Drive
Sterling Heights, MI 48310
(810) 826-3938
http://www.iaadp.org/

Magic City Canine Club Dog Agility Club

3962 Lindsey Loop Road Bessemer,
Alabama 35022
http://mck9club.webs.com/contactus.htm

Montgomery Humane Society

1150 John Overton Dr.
Montgomery, AL 36110-3235
(334) 409-0622
www.montgomeryhumane.com/

Montgomery Kennel Club

P. O. Box 241362
Montgomery, AL 36124-1362
http://www.montgomerykennelclub.org/

NEADS/Dogs for Deaf and Disabled Americans

P.O. Box 1100
Princeton, MA 01541

National Headquarters:

305 Redemption Rock Trail South
Princeton, MA 01541
(978) 422-9064 Voice or TDD
http://neads.org

Nightwinds International Dog Training Specialized Protection

(520) 631-6293
www.nightwinds.com

North Alabama Canine Cruisers Dog Agility Club

http://www.aguntcockers.com/nacc/

North American Dog Agility Council

24605 Dodds Road
Bend, Oregon 97701
www.nadac.com
E-mail: info@nadac.com

Paws With A Cause

4646 South Division
Wayland, MI 49348
Phone: 800-253-7297
(616) 877-7297 (V/TDD)
www.pawswithacause.org

San Francisco SPCA Hearing Dog Program

201 Alabama Street
San Francisco CA 94103
(415) 522-3500
http://www.sfsPCA.org

Southeastern Guide Dogs, Inc.

4210 77th Street East
Palmetto, FL 34221
(941) 729-5665
www.guidedogs.org

Susquehanna Service Dogs

1078 Gravel Hill Road
Grantville, PA 17028
Phone: 717-599-5920
www.keystonehumanservices.org

Therapet Animal Assisted Therapy Foundation

P.O. Box 130118
Tyler, TX 75713
(903) 535-2125
www.therapet.com

Therapy Partners, Inc.®

3054 Leeman Ferry Rd | Suite J
Huntsville, Alabama 35801
(256) 881-5700
http://www.therapypartners.org/

Therapy Dogs International, Inc.

88 Bartley Road
Flanders, NJ 07836
(973) 252-9800
www.tdi-dog.org

United States Dog Agility Association, Inc.

P.O. Box 850955
Richardson, TX 75085-0955
972.487.2200
http://usdaa.com/

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Julio E. Correa, PhD, Associate Professor & Extension Animal Scientist,
Alabama A&M University

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