

Service Needed: The Necessity of Service Animals Access

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Background and Introduction

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, disabilities affect more than 70 million adults in the United States (CDC, 2024). Further, data collected between 2009 and 2017 show that about 1 in 6 parents (17%) reported that their children aged 3-17 years old had been diagnosed with a developmental disability.

A literature review was conducted to demonstrate the benefits to individuals with developmental disabilities of having service animals.

Evidence from the past three decades of research on human – animal relationships have shown that the that animals can increase important neurotransmitters such as oxytocin and dopamine. Having service animals has been shown to have benefits for children with autism spectrum disease (ASD), by assisting with cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development (Figure 1).

Service animals can also assist in important related to ASD and other developmental disabilities such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and anxiety as well as physical comorbidities such as blindness, deafness, seizures, and other mobility issues.

Glossary of Terms

- **Comorbidities:** Medical conditions that a person may have in addition to the primary diagnosis
- **Disability:** A physical and/or mental condition that limits a persons’ movements, senses and/or activities
- **Accessibility:** The assurance that persons with disabilities can access and gain benefit from the same services and environments as persons without disabilities.

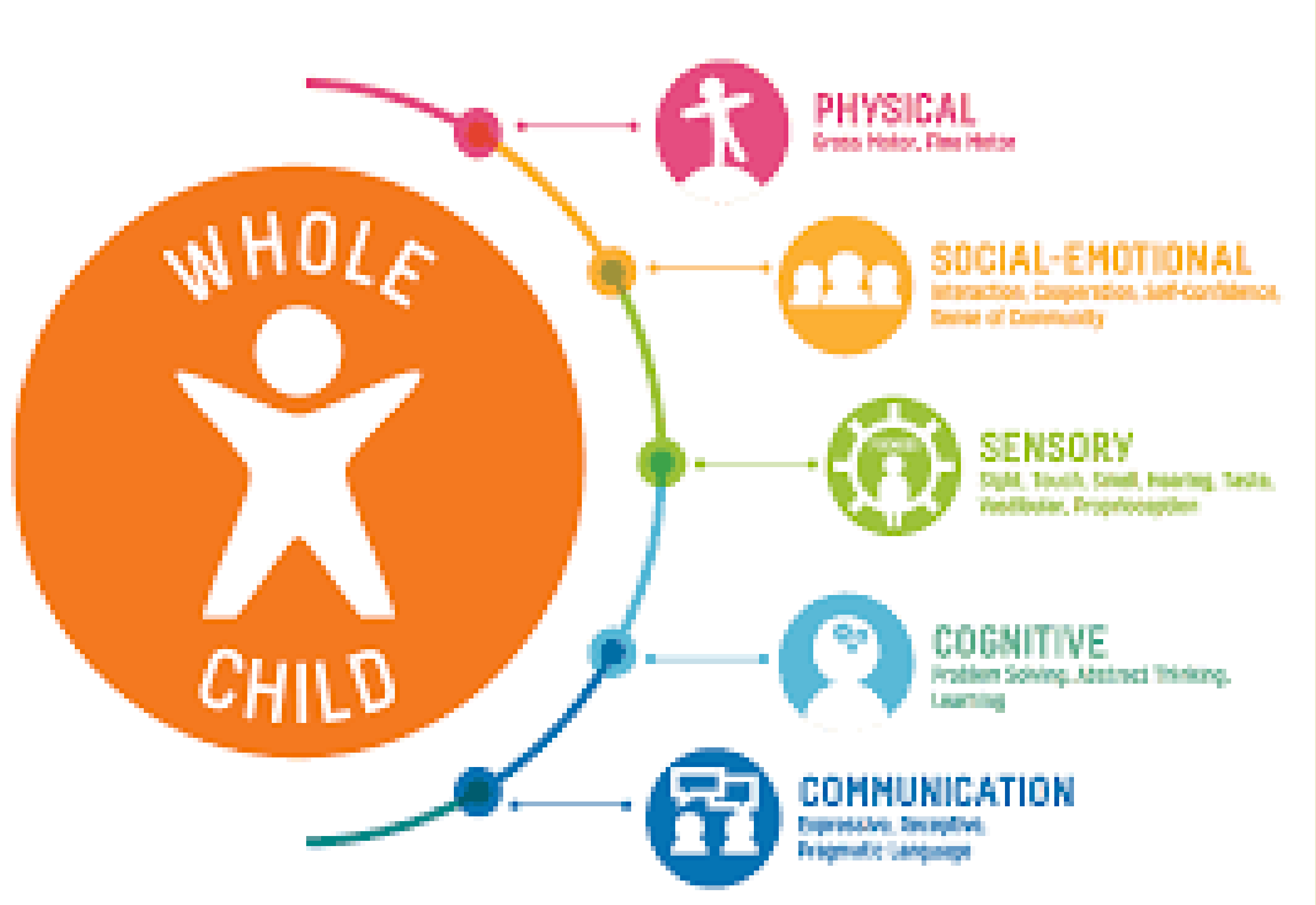


Figure 1. Whole Child Development

Service Animal Types

Service animals are defined as dogs that are individually trained to work or perform task for a persons with disabilities. Service animals are genuinely must allow service animals to accompany a person with a disability to all areas of a facility where the public is able to go (ADA 2020). They are considered a medical equipment.

Emotional Support animals are any animal(s) for the purpose of providing emotional support in alleviating one or more of the symptoms of their disabilities.

The key difference between **Service Animals** and **Emotional Service Animals** is that service animals are specially trained in key task that aid individuals with disabilities.

Accessibility

The cost of a service dog can range \$15,000 - \$50,000, with additional annual costs for veterinary care. Service animals, while deemed medical equipment, are not covered by health insurance, including Medicare & Medicaid. This makes service animals virtually unavailable to the population that would benefit most.

Benefits of Service Dogs

- Cognitive Development**
- Initiates desire to read (Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004)
 - Promotes sustained attention and engagement (Kotrschal & Ortbauer, 2003)
 - Increases performance in gross motor activities, such as running, crawling, and throwing a ball (Gee, Harris, & Johnson, 2007)
- Physical Development**
- Lowers blood pressure (Friedman, Thomas, Stein, & Kleiger, 2003)
 - Decreases rapid breathing (DeVries, Glasper, & Detillion, 2003)
 - Motivates children with physical challenges to perform routine physical therapy (Gee, 2008)
- Emotional Development**
- Reduces stress and anxiety; nurtures calming effect during traumatic situations (Odendaal, 2000)
 - Offers comfort and safety in new situations (Prothmann, Bienert, & Ettrich, 2006)
 - Assists in overcoming fears and developing patience and perseverance (Brown, 2009)
 - Supports children with depression (Fine, 2010)
- Social Development**
- Creates opportunities for dialogue and initiates positive social interactions with peers (Fine & Eisen, 2008)
 - Encourages participation with play organizers and friendships with peers (Katcher & Beck, 2010)
 - Decreases aggressive behavior toward others (Fine & Eisen, 2008)
 - Promotes social skills, including turn taking, making introductions, accepting responsibility, and becoming independent (Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005)

Figure 2. Developmental Benefits

Psychological Behaviors of Children With Autism	How the Service Dog Provides Safety and Companionship
Mood swings; emotional outbursts	The service dog may crawl onto the child’s lap to calm the child
Nonverbal responses	The service dog can enhance verbal skills by encouraging the child to give specific voice commands
Impulsive darting or running	The service dog can retrieve the child to a teacher or family member; the child with autism can also be tethered to the dog while the teacher or parent holds the dog’s leash
Repetitive behaviors: • Hand flapping • Rocking • Twirling • Self-stimulating behaviors: wiggling fingers in front of the eyes, scratching, slapping, excessive use of hands • Jumping	The service dog could interrupt negative behaviors by touching the child in order to break his or her repetitive thoughts
Pica (tendency to eat things that are not food)	The service dog can interrupt the behaviors and prevent the child from consuming nonfoods
Socially withdrawn from peers	Attention focused on the service dog enables children with autism to connect with their peers

Figure 3. Physiological Benefits