



Autism Assistance Dog Program

What is the Autism Assistance Dog Program?

Guide Dogs SA has developed a program to provide assistance dogs to families of children with autism. The Autism Assistance Dog (AAD) Program is designed to improve the quality of life for both the child with autism and his or her family through three key areas: safety, independence and inclusion. This is achieved by providing a fully trained dog and training and support to the parent/s and child.

Every child is unique. However, some of the behaviour typically associated with autism can be isolating, raise mobility issues and reduce social and community interactions. Often, children with autism have substantially lower awareness of danger and limits, which requires intensive support and vigilance by the parent/carer in order to ensure the safety of the child. Due to these and other factors, the family/carers may experience high levels of stress and often report experiencing a 'lack of normality'. This is especially the case in social situations or when out in the community. Attending to everyday activities like shopping or going for a walk, attending social gatherings and events, visiting friends, travel or going to a restaurant with the child could be challenging or is often not possible. As children with autism have a high tendency to 'bolt' (attempt to run off/abscond) during times of anxiety or stress, parents and carers are facing multi-faceted challenges to keep children with autism safe.

How will a dog assist in providing safety?

An AAD can make a substantial contribution to a child's safety particularly during outings. The parent or primary carer has physical control of the dog via a lead and collar at all times when away from home. The dog is connected to the child via a tether that is secured to a belt around the child's waist. This allows the child to move and walk along together with the dog and the parent or primary carer. However, should the child attempt to 'bolt', the dog is trained to resist the pull away by sitting or lying down. This will support the safety of the child and give the parent or primary carer time to intervene.

The dog's trained responses to an attempt to bolt, will free the parent or primary carer from having to restrain the child or rely on continuous physical contact (like holding hands) while out of the home. When the dog is connected to the child in this way, the child quickly learns that they are unable to run away and the attempt to bolt/abscond is reduced or completely removed. The dog is trained to stop at kerbs, steps and stairs and responds to vocal commands from the parent/carer, such as 'left' and 'right' providing extra security for the child and support to the parent/carer.

In addition to providing child safety-support, AADs are trained by Guide Dogs SA to assist the parent/carer with behaviour management within the home.



The service that AADs provide is designed to support the ongoing responsibilities of parents/carers, assist in reducing the pressures and physical demand on parents/carers and provide positive companionship to the child.

Independence

An AAD assists with early intervention training for independence and to manage challenging behaviour / situations while reducing levels of stress and distress. An AAD will assist the parent with their child by providing independent mobility, whether walking to school or to other destinations in the community. The child can walk freely alongside the dog but remain safe, hence extending a comfortable access to a wider variety of environments.

An AAD can be utilised to assist with personal tasks of daily life and to develop skills for the child to participate as autonomously as possible. The presence of the AAD calms the child, distracting or preventing meltdowns and interrupting repetitive behavior patterns before sensory overload is experienced.

The dog can provide companionship for the child, as well as social and emotional support for the parent.

Some of the family benefits reported to us include: improved quality and quantity of sleep (the child may wake less because of the AAD sleeping in their room); lower overall stress levels; increased number of outings and social interactions.

Inclusion

An AAD can help the child participate in social, leisure and educational activities, as well as reducing the stress associated with interacting with other people. The benefits for the entire family are individual and varied. The majority of families with an AAD report that outings with the entire family become possible and less stressful with the assistance of the trained dog. The dog's presence may also encourage and increase social interaction between the child and his or her siblings and peers.

An AAD has the same legal rights of access as a Guide or Hearing Dog. It is clearly identified by a coat which has securing points and a handle that the child can hold if appropriate or required. The purpose of the coat is to bring awareness to the special circumstances regarding the dog. This also increases the ease of access to public places by differentiating the status of an AAD from that of a pet.

General

The program is currently available to families residing in South Australia.



Eligibility Criteria

The Child with Autism

In order to be eligible for the AAD Program, the child will be:

- aged between three and eight years **and**
- have a confirmed diagnosis of autism from an official body **and**
- display the following behaviour or tendencies:
 - a severe deficit in verbal and non-verbal communication skills
 - a severe impairment in functioning
 - limited to nil social interaction ability
 - severely repetitive behaviour
 - severe and frequent absconding tendencies
 - evidence of current restrictive practise taking place within the home environment and when taking the child out in the community.

The Parent / Primary Carer (hereafter referred to as the 'parent')

In order for the parent to be eligible for the AAD program, the parent will be:

- self-motivated
- actively listen and participate in the skills the instructor has given during assessment
- complete the dog handling assessment sessions and deem suitable to handle an AAD
- actively be involved and initiate tasks set by the instructor throughout assessment including social stories
- available and flexible for assessment visits and not cancel more than three times during assessment
- the parent/s undertaking the assessment will complete a Medical Waiver Form to confirm fit to undertake assessment training in order to be eligible
- a requirement that one parent is at home and does not work full time over the next 8-10 years of the dog's working life. If working part time the other designated handler that resides in the home must be able to care for the dog during this time.

The Family Home Environment

- Families must be able to provide a safe and secure environment, including an area for respite for the dog and a suitable toileting area.
- Families accept that it will not be possible to have an AAD and a pet dog as the presence of another dog can interfere with the ongoing effectiveness of the AAD. Families who have or are planning to have a pet dog cannot be considered for the program.



Where not to take a Guide Dog / AAD

These dogs are not allowed to enter the Operating Theatre, Burns Unit or Intensive Care Unit of a hospital. They are also not allowed access into a Zoo as this would cause disruption to the animals and is also not a good environment for an AAD to work in. When planning to take an AAD to any of the National Parks, the park's authority must be informed of the planned visit in advance.

Relevant legislation that covers the access and general rights of Guide Dogs and AADs:

- Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Commonwealth), (s9)
- Equal Opportunity Act 1984 (SA)
- Dog and Cat Management Act 1995 S21A.

Training for the Parent / Primary Carer

An AAD is a highly trained, specialised working dog. These dogs should be viewed differently to pet dogs or to those dogs that are part of the Pets as Therapy program. Although the AAD provides companionship for the entire family and will increase social inclusion and participation in the community for all involved, it is important to acknowledge that there is significant training and input required to ensure the success of the placement.

The dog is only handled by the designated parents/primary carers to ensure a consistent approach to the team's training and the services provided by the dog but also to ensure a consistent and stable focus point for the dog. This is vital to the dog's service capacity, obedience and wellbeing.

Step 1 – Assessment

On successful completion of meeting our criteria and after application submission, you are asked to attend an interview at the Guide Dog Centre. If successful at the completion of the interview you will be advised to contact your NDIA (National Disability Insurance Agency). You will be advised to meet with a planner to discuss an Autism Assistance Dog Package. Once approved, we will contact and arrange assessment visits to ascertain your suitability for an AAD.

There are up to six home environment assessment visits from our instructors. Parents/primary carers are also required to undertake a one - two day dog handling assessment course in our Guide Dog Centre.

Instructors will meet and review all materials and make a decision on the suitability of an AAD in your home.



Step 2 – Wait List/Matching

Once on the waiting list you will await for a dog to be matched. Matching is a complex task and families need to be prepared to wait for the best match to their child and family situation.

Waiting times can vary depending on the number of dogs in training and people on the waiting list.

The matching process is crucial to selecting the AAD that best meets the requirement of each individual family.

Step 3 – Training

Training consists of the following:

- Parents or primary carers attend a five day dog handling course at the Guide Dog Centre. Only after the parents or primary carers successfully pass the Public Access Certification Test can the dog go home to complete the training.

Please note: The main purpose for this initial five day training is to establish that we have made the correct match in your handling skills to your dog, and that you learn the relevant skills to be successful in passing your PACT test in order to establish if you can continue training with your dog. The PACT test will provide a solid understanding of your dog's temperament and ability. This five day intensive course enables parents or primary carers to build a positive foundation for the working relationship with their dog. The child is not involved in these classes.

- In-home Training (child presence required)

Parents or primary carers can expect to be working Monday to Friday once a day for two and half hours over a three week period. The child is required to be present during this period so will need to take some leave from pre-school / school for these visits.

The aim for the team is to work with one of our instructors on your agreed objectives and to graduate at the end of this period; however each class training is unique and takes into consideration the unique requirements of each child and their environment. A degree of flexibility and strong commitment by all involved to accommodate the intensive nature of in-home training is required. The instructor can review the dog's suitability throughout all periods of the training and will sit down and discuss this with you if they feel this needs to be addressed.

During the weeks following class training, please keep the family schedule free of appointments and visitors.



Step 4 – Guide Dogs SA Bronze Paw Certificate

- Bronze Paw Training (within three months after graduating in Step 3)

The final step of the formal training is the Guide Dogs Bronze Paw training. In order to consolidate the skills that you learn during class training, it is compulsory for the nominated handler/s to attend the Guide Dogs Bronze Paw Training sessions, within three months of graduating. The date of this training (two and half days) will be determined by the Guide Dogs SA/NT staff and we will endeavour to give you as much notice as possible.

The Bronze Paw Award aims to ensure that the handler can control the dog at all times on lead, with or without distractions, in a variety of environments, and to ensure a basic knowledge of the health and welfare of their dog, including free running in a controlled area.

Application and Assessment Process

If you are interested in participating in the AAD Program or have any further questions, please contact Guide Dogs SA on 8203 8333 or email yoursupportline@guidedogs.org.au

We will send you the relevant Consent Form and AAD Application Form to complete from your initial enquiry. Please return these forms together with any diagnosis reports to:

Confidential –
AAD Program Support Coordinator
Guide Dog Services
Guide Dogs SA/NT
251 Morphett St
Adelaide SA 5000

Once Guide Dogs SA receives your AAD Application Form and any further documents, the AAD Program Support Coordinator will take a look over the details supplied, confirm eligibility criteria and ensure that the program suits the child's/family's needs. We will then make contact with you to invite in for an interview.

Our principle aim is to ensure that the family is informed and involved in the assessment process as much as possible.

If you have any further questions please contact Guide Dog Services by phone on 08 8203 8333 or email yoursupportline@guidedogs.org.au