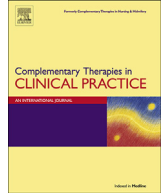




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Welcoming max: Increasing pediatric provider knowledge of service dogs[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Service dogs have been used in the adult population for decades. Recently, there has been a diversification in types of service dogs, specifically for the pediatric population. Although guide dogs and mobility dogs are accepted in society, autism assistance dogs, seizure alert and response dogs and diabetic alert dogs are relatively new. As pediatric service dogs attract more attention, pediatric providers need to be prepared to answer parental inquiries regarding service dog use. The pediatric provider is well equipped to identify children who could benefit from a service dog intervention and should be able to make a referral to a reputable service dog provider. This article presents guidance on appropriate patient selection, making a service dog referral, and risks and benefits involved. Pediatric providers are ideally positioned to be leaders in implementing this evolving new assistive technology that can help to alleviate pediatric disabilities for both the patient and family.

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1. Case

J.C. is a 14-year-old teenager with cerebral palsy. She is impaired physically and is wheelchair bound. She is cognitively intact and developmentally age appropriate. She relies on her mother to help her with her activities of daily life. Although she receives physical and occupational therapy, there are some tasks she will never be able to perform without assistance. As she progresses through adolescence, independence is becoming increasingly important to her.

A. L. is a 5-year-old boy with autism. He frequently has emotional outbursts and is known to bolt into the street. His mother is overwhelmed; even simple errands to the grocery store with her son can be fraught with anxiety. She clasps his hand tightly anytime they leave the house to prevent him from running away from her. She lies awake at night listening for him to get out of bed and frequently checks on him. The entire family is exhausted.

Both J.C. and A.L. could benefit from a service dog; however, their pediatric provider is not sure what the requirements are for a service dog, or how to help the families apply.

Despite research supporting the use of service dogs for children with disabilities, very few healthcare providers refer patients to service dog providers [23]. There are several barriers that may prevent referral: lack of education about service dogs and animal-assisted therapy, absence of a uniform protocol for obtaining a service dog, and assumptions about the expense of a service dog. It is estimated that there are 30,000 to 35,000 working service dogs in the United States [16]. The pediatric provider should be aware of which patients would benefit from a service dog intervention.

This article will increase the familiarity of the pediatric provider with the different types of service dogs, and how they differ from other animal-assisted interventions (AAIs). In addition, this article will propose a set of guidelines regarding which patients may benefit from a service dog and how to refer the patient and family to the appropriate service dog provider. Lastly, this article will examine the benefits and risks of the use of service dogs in the pediatric population.

1.1. Definition of service dogs

Under the revised American with Disabilities Act (ADA), a service animal is a dog or miniature horse that is specifically and individually trained to perform a task or do work for a disabled person [34]. Examples of tasks or work include alerting a person of an imminent seizure, guiding a blind person, or pulling a wheelchair. Service animals are working animals, not pets [34].

1.2. How service dogs differ from therapy dogs

As dogs enter the healthcare setting more frequently, the distinction between service dog and therapy dog roles is an important one for healthcare providers. Although, the terms service

dog and therapy dog are often used interchangeably, they are not synonymous. In contrast to service dogs, therapy dogs are “personal pets that provide supervised, goal-directed intervention to individuals in hospitals, nursing homes, special-population schools, and other treatment facilities” [14]. As the role of therapy dog increases in the hospital, a distinction should also be made between therapy dogs and volunteer visiting dogs. Animal-assisted activities (AAA) encompass volunteer visiting dogs working in conjunction with non-healthcare volunteers. Whereas, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a professional human-dog team directed by a licensed healthcare professional [37].

2. Service dogs in pediatrics

2.1. Types of pediatric service dogs

The availability of service dogs to pediatric patients is a relatively new phenomenon. Modern use of service dogs for adults originated after World War I with guide dogs for the blind and visually impaired [16]. More recently the service dog field has evolved to include many different types of service dogs including hearing dogs, diabetic alert dogs, seizure alert and response dogs, mobility assistance dogs, and dogs for children with autism. Table 1 outlines the most common types of pediatric service dogs and some of the tasks they perform. Table 1 is by no means a complete list of service dogs in pediatrics. Not included are the newer and less common types of service dogs for different disabilities, such as fetal alcohol spectrum and drug exposure assistance dogs, and food allergen detection and alert dogs. Psychiatric service dogs and PTSD dogs are not included as they are more common in the adult population, yet they may be appropriate for some adolescents.

As demonstrated by the wide array of types of service dogs, the pediatric provider should feel comfortable recommending a service dog intervention to any family who has a child with a debilitating condition. Table 2 outlines some of the more common disabilities and medical diagnosis for the pediatric population and service dog eligibility criteria. It is important to note that if a child has a disability that does not fit into one specific service dog category, many service dog providers will provide multipurpose dogs or specialized dogs for children. Age requirements for service dog placement vary based on service dog type, service dog provider discretion, child maturity, and parental ability to function as a responsible co-handler. Traditionally, service dogs have functioned with the disabled person as their handler. Some newer types of service dogs, such as Autism dogs, function in a three-way team, with a parent as the primary handler. Other types of service dogs such as guide dogs for the visually impaired do not lend themselves as well to a three-way team. Therefore, while very few service dog providers will provide a guide dog to a visually impaired pediatric patient, many of these newer types of service dogs can be placed with children. Any child unable to autonomously care for a service dog will need a third party facilitator, often a parent, to assist in service dog care [13]. Service

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