

Autism Assistance Dog Program

What is the Autism Assistance Dog program?

Guide Dogs WA has developed a program to provide assistance dogs to families of children living 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, handler 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 are often not possible at all. 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 multifaceted challenges to keep children with autism safe.

How will a Autism Assistance Dog assist in providing safety?

An Autism Assistance Dog 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 child holds a special handle attached to the coat the Autism Assistance Dog wears. This allows the child to move and walk along together with the dog and the parent/carer.

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'.

In addition to providing safety, AADs are trained by Guide Dogs WA 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 alongside, thus 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 behaviour patterns before sensory overload is experienced.

The AAD provides 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; lower overall stress levels; increased level of independence; easier transitioning between environments; and an increased number of outings and social interactions.

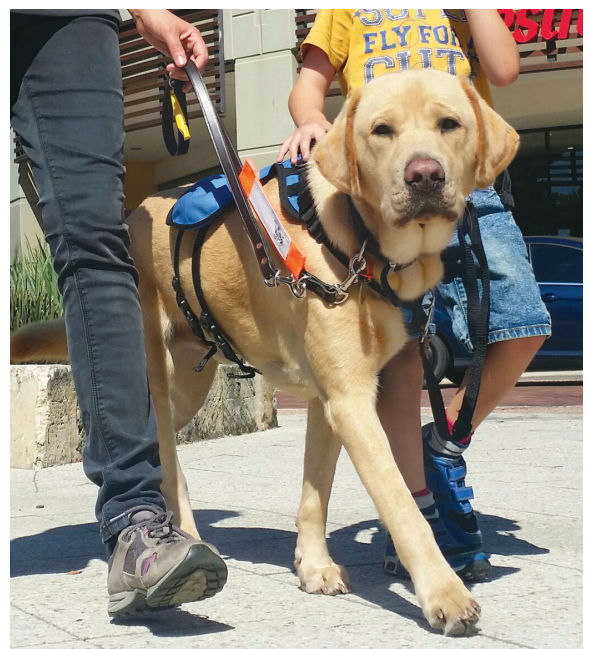
Inclusion

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 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 available to families residing in Western 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 moderate to severe deficit in verbal and non-verbal communication skills,
 - › a moderate to severe impairment in functioning,
 - › limited to nil social interaction ability,
 - › severely repetitive behaviour,
 - › severe and frequent absconding tendencies,
 - › non-aggressive towards people or animals.

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 dog handling training and assessment, and deemed suitable to handle an AAD,
- actively be involved and initiate tasks set by the Instructor throughout assessment,
- be 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, where necessary.

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.
- Other pets in the home must be not too old or young, and must not display aggression or jealousy. If there is another dog in the home, the dog will be assessed for its suitability to be present alongside an AAD, as another dog can sometimes interfere with the ongoing effectiveness of the AAD.

Autism Assistance Dog access rights

Under the Dog Act 1976 – SECT 8, Guide and Assistance Dogs are allowed access to everywhere their handler goes – and this includes dogs in training.

It is an offence to refuse entry to a person accompanied by a an Autism Assistance Dog; the only exceptions to this rule are operating theatres and some areas of zoos (such as the walk-through exhibits).

When planning to take an AAD to a National Park, the park's authority must be informed of the planned visit in advance.

Legislation that covers the access/rights of Autism Assistance Dogs

- Disability Services Act 1993 (WA)
- National Disability Services Standards (2014)
- Disability Services Act 1986 (Commonwealth)
- Privacy Act 1986 (Commonwealth)
- Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Commonwealth)
- Dog Act 1976

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 companion dogs. 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, you will be interviewed by one of our Autism Assistance Dog program staff. Once approved, we will contact you and arrange assessment visits to ascertain your suitability for an AAD.

Parents/primary carers are also required to undertake a dog handling session, and there will be home environment assessment visits from our Instructors.

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

Step 2 – Wait List and Matching

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

Matching is a complex task and families need to be prepared to wait for the best match to their child and family situation.

Step 3 – Training

Training consists of the following:

- **In-home Training (Parent/Carers only)**

Parents or primary carers take part in a five day dog handling course. Only after the parents or primary carers successfully pass the Assistance Dogs International (ADI) access test can the dog be granted full access rights.

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 ADI test in order to establish if you can continue training with your dog. The ADI 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)**

We will continue the training and skills learned in the first week, with the child included from this second week. The child is required to be present full time during this period, so will need to take some leave from pre-school/school for these visits. Breaks will be included where necessary, depending on the child's needs.

The aim for the team is to work with one of our Instructors on your agreed objectives and to complete the required training. 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.

Aftercare visits will then be completed after 3 months, 6 months, and then annually or as required. The ADI test requires an ongoing yearly assessment for the rest of the dog's working life.

Autism Assistance Dog Program

Application and assessment process

If you are interested in participating in the AAD program or have any further questions, please contact Guide Dogs WA on; guidedoginquiries@guidedogswa.com.au or 9311 8202.

You can apply online at;
www.guidedogswa.com.au/getsupport/autism-assistance-dogs/

Once Guide Dogs WA receives your AAD Application Form and any further documents, the AAD Program 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 schedule an in-home assessment with a suitable dog when one becomes available.

Our principal 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 WA on 9311 8202 or email guidedoginquiries@guidedogswa.com.au

Guide Dogs WA
61 Kichener Avenue, Victoria Park 6100
www.guidedogswa.com.au

