

# FASD Service Dogs

## (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder)

### 4 Paws for Ability



**January 2009.** [4 Paws for Ability](#) has pioneered the use of service dogs for another unique developmental disability. In 2008, we placed our first FASD Service Dog with a nine-year-old boy from Georgia, Iyal Winokur. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a lifelong birth defect that occurs when a pregnant woman drinks alcohol. This "hidden disability" leaves an individual with neurological, behavioral, and emotional impairments. Up to 94% of children prenatally exposed to alcohol will also fight mental illness. *Most people don't know that FASD is the leading preventable cause of cognitive disabilities.* And while more and more

people have become aware of the number of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, the prevalence of FASDs is 50% greater than Autism. In the United States, one out of every hundred live births is affected by prenatal alcohol exposure.

While the organic brain damage of FASD occurs even before a baby is born, some symptoms and behaviors associated with this disability look very similar to Autism or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, ADHD. As 4 Paws for Ability continues to be the largest organization in the U.S. placing skilled Autism Service Dogs, it was a natural progression to train a service dog for a child affected by FASD.

### Sensory Overload



Many children with FASDs have sensory issues causing involuntary repetitive movements or behaviors that seem out of place in a social context. These movements thus become the "signal" or "command" taught to the dog. The dog is then trained to disrupt the behavior by nuzzling the child or putting a paw on the child. Many children require deep pressure to quiet an over-aroused regulatory system. A large service dog can provide much needed weight to help calm a child when he or she is

lying on top of the child. A dog is much more interesting than a weighted blanket! For those children who need sensory input, the physical presence of the dog offers tactile stimulation and "contact comfort."

## **Calming**

An FASD Service Dog's presence offers a calming influence. Like children who are affected by ADHD, many children suffering from fetal alcohol exposure have difficulty sitting and staying at the table or being able to focus. Due to an over-aroused nervous system, children with FASD have trouble settling down and not becoming agitated.

"We have noticed Iyal spending up to 30 minutes just lying on top of Chancer hanging out," says his dad. "Iyal will have his head on top of Chancer and the two of them will be quiet together. This is huge! Before having Chancer, when Iyal didn't know what to do with himself; while waiting during a transition, he would run around the house out-of-control and get increasingly irritated. Iyal was unable to stay calm by himself."

## **Social Lubrication**



Similar to the ways in which a service dog assists an individual with Autism, FASD Service Dogs provide support in a variety of environments, which result in improved communication and social skills.

The term "social lubrication" was developed by researchers, Mugford and McComisky to describe the phenomenon where the presence of animals increased social interaction between people. Other social scientists suggested that the attractiveness of a child's pet to other children may, as a secondary gain, enhance the attractiveness of the child as a

friend or playmate. Makes sense!

Shortly after Chancer joined the Winokur family, Iyal's mom told 4 Paws, "Iyal asks us if we can take Chancer with us whenever we are going out. He is so proud of Chancer and tells other kids immediately that Chancer is his working dog."

## **How a Nine-Year-Old Boy Became an Ambassador for Service Dogs**

"While waiting to enter an exhibit at the World of Coca-Cola in Atlanta, Iyal spontaneously introduced our service dog, Chancer, to a family standing next to us in line. Iyal grinned and said, 'Chancer is my service dog and my best friend ... my brother. He makes me feel better when I'm upset. And if I'm crying, he comes over and gives me kisses all over my face! I don't feel as lonely with Chancer.' I could not have written a better script for Iyal. I was thrilled to hear him say these words to folks he had

just met!"

Generally people love dogs and naturally want to interact with them. This interaction often transfers to children and offers opportunities to improve social skills. Further, the desire to give verbal commands can increase expressive language. 4 Paws teaches the children how to command simple tricks from their service dogs. The kids love to show off how smart their special friends are which also enhances the child's self-esteem.

## **Better Thinking**

Some of the significant benefits that an FASD Service Dog can bring to children are:

- An advancement in abstract and concrete thinking
- Improvement in focus
- An increase in the length of attention span

"Perhaps the most profound 'untargeted behavior' that changed after obtaining Chancer was an emergence of language," says his mother. "Within two weeks after our return from our training at 4 Paws, we noticed that Iyal was now using multisyllabic words in complex sentences. This was a significant difference in the way in which Iyal communicated prior to having Chancer with us! "Not only was he using more sophisticated language, but his words showed self-reflective thinking: a different self awareness was also emerging. In many children with developmental disabilities a sense of identity is often compromised," she said. "We could never have anticipated this sort of transformation for Iyal."



## **Self-Confidence**

An important role of the service dog is giving the individual more self-confidence, which promotes independence. For children who also have attachment issues or fear of abandonment, the unconditional companionship offered by the child's service dog is very healing. Often children with disabilities are generally dependent and can feel powerless due to their disability. The experience of some control over their service dog may provide a sense of mastery and self-assurance.

"Sometimes when Iyal doesn't know I'm watching, I see him command Chancer to do tricks. After Chancer does the tricks, Iyal gets him a treat all by himself and rewards him. This occurs several times a day. It is a great example of gained independence," says Iyal's mom.

## Understanding Others



Children living with fetal alcohol exposure, like children with Autism, may have difficulty "in putting themselves in other people's shoes." Taking care of a service dog offers a chance to develop nurturance and practice people skills.

Iyal's mom reports that the relationship with Chancer helps Iyal to become more other-directed. Chancer provides immediate feedback, as an animal lets you know clearly when it needs something. Interacting with Chancer helps to shift Iyal's focus off of himself and cultivates thinking about others.

For children who are challenged by interpreting the facial expression of others or understanding behaviors, the opportunity to evoke compassion is critical. Developing empathy also pertains to a child's sense of self and the feelings and emotional investment in something other than themselves.

Children learn empathy in their relationship with their service dogs as they must learn to read nonverbal cues. And in a non-threatening way, the children learn to assess the needs of their service dog and then learn to choose behaviors that will presumably meet that need. This unique nonverbal mode of communication sharpens the child's ability to decode nonverbal signals.

## Safety

Parents of children living with prenatal alcohol exposure have significant concerns for their children's safety; physical and emotional. Most children with FASDs have extreme impulsivity. They may dart out into the street or a parking lot without looking. FASD Service Dogs, like Autism Service Dogs, can be trained to be tethered to a child, which increases a sense of security for both parents and child.

Iyal's mom shared with the staff at 4 Paws, "Iyal's emotional safety is intertwined with a great sense of vulnerability. Individuals with FASD are easily taken advantage of and exploited. Iyal will do virtually anything to make a friend. It's our hope that if people around Iyal know of Chancer's existence, the presence of a large dog will deter someone with less than honorable intentions."

Families whose children have FASDs are often told that their children need "external brains" to help them navigate through life. Abstract concepts like telling time feel much more complicated. The combination of impulsivity and lack of judgment can leave

children with this disability extremely negative. Research suggests that putting in place external supports allow children who are alcohol-exposed more chance to succeed. An FASD Service Dog in essence provides another external brain.

## **The Bond**

Children suffering from brain damage or psychiatric disabilities may have difficulty in creating intimacy with others. Trust is a big issue for those with attachment disorders. An FASD Service Dog becomes a form of grounding for a child with fetal alcohol exposure. The dogs serve as an emotional and sometimes physical anchor for a child who lives in a world that feels disorienting and confusing. When unexpected change or transitions easily offset the emotional balance of a child, the consistency of a service dog's behavior helps that child be more able to cope with the unexpected.

Iyal's dad says, "If Chancer hears Iyal getting upset, he gets up wherever he is in the house to go and find him, and lies down near him. When Iyal is having a tantrum, Chancer comes over and tries to nuzzle without being told to. Chancer is so tolerant!"

Iyal's mother says that in a store or other places in public, Chancer becomes agitated if Iyal moves too far away or goes into a restroom. He will alert the second Iyal is out of his sight. "After a huge meltdown," she says, "Iyal asked for Chancer in between sobs. I looked over the balcony and saw Iyal sitting at the bottom of the stairs, with his arms up in the 'nuzzle' position waiting for Chancer to come and comfort him. It brought tears to my eyes."

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