

SERVICE DOG TO THE RESCUE

A REFLECTION TOOL FOR FAMILIES

This reflection tool will help you think through how your child's needs show up in daily life and how a service dog may provide meaningful support—so you can clearly explain why you are pursuing and fundraising for a service dog.

Step 1: Think About Daily Life

Every child's experience with disability is different.

Use the space below to reflect on how your child's diagnosis shows up in everyday life.

Area of Impact	How Does This Show Up in Daily Life for Your Child?
Emotional regulation	
Anxiety or overwhelm	
Transitions between activities	
Participation in family or community activities	
Social connection	

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REFLECTION CONTINUED

Area of Impact	How Does This Show Up in Daily Life for Your Child?
Motivation and engagement	
Confidence and independence	
Transitions between activities	
Sleep or bedtime routines	
Other challenges your child experiences	
Other challenges your family experiences	

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EXAMPLES OF HOW SERVICE DOGS MAY SUPPORT CHILDREN



Service dogs are trained to perform specific behaviors and tasks that can support emotional regulation, participation, and confidence in daily life.

Below are examples of ways autism service dogs may help.

Social Interaction

Service dogs often act as a social bridge, helping children connect with others in natural ways. **A service dog may:**

- Create opportunities for positive interaction with peers and community members
- Help shift conversations from the child's disability to the dog
- Provide a shared topic of interest that encourages communication
- Increase a child's confidence during social situations
- Serve as a visual cue that the child may need patience or understanding

Some teams also use fun companion commands like "shake," "hi five," or "roll over" to encourage interaction and engagement.

Communication

For children who communicate differently, a service dog can help make social exchanges easier. A service dog may:

- Provide context to others that communication differences may be present
- Support scripted interactions such as answering questions about the dog
- Encourage children to initiate interactions using prepared responses or AAC devices
- Help take the focus off the disability and onto the dog

Sensory Regulation

Many children benefit from the calming sensory input a dog can provide.

Service dogs may be trained to offer:

- Deep pressure therapy, which can help regulate the nervous system
- Grounding support during moments of overwhelm
- Tactile input through touch or contact with the dog
- Calming physical presence during overstimulating situations

Examples of tasks may include:

- "Lap" – dog lays across the child's lap
- "Lay on" – dog provides body pressure while the child lies down
- Hug" – dog remains still while the child hugs them

These interactions can help reduce the intensity or length of dysregulation.

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Motor Skills and Engagement

Service dogs often become powerful motivation partners. Children may become more engaged in activities such as:

- Walking
- Brushing the dog
- Feeding routines
- laying and exercising with the dog

Because the child is motivated by the relationship with the dog, these activities can naturally encourage movement and skill development.

Anxiety and Emotional Support

Many families report that a service dog helps children feel calmer and more secure.

A service dog may:

- Provide grounding presence during stressful moments
- Offer predictable companionship in unfamiliar environments
- Help children cope with unexpected changes in routine
- Provide calming physical contact during difficult moments
- Support transitions between activities and environments

Research has also shown that the presence of a trained service dog can reduce stress hormone levels in some children with autism.

Daily Living Skills and Independence

Service dogs can help create meaningful opportunities for responsibility and routine.

For example, children may participate in:

- Feeding the dog
- Grooming and brushing
- Preparing for outings
- Participating in morning or bedtime routines

These daily interactions can help build independence, confidence, and a sense of accomplishment.

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EXAMPLES OF HOW SERVICE DOGS MAY SUPPORT CHILDREN



Sleep Support

Some children benefit from the calming presence of a service dog during nighttime routines.

A service dog may:

- Provide calming pressure or contact when settling down for sleep
- Offer a sense of comfort and security during the night
- Help establish predictable bedtime routines
- Provide soothing companionship if a child wakes during the night

Emotional Regulation and Behavior

Service dogs are frequently trained to support emotional regulation.

Tasks may include:

- Deep pressure therapy during dysregulation
- Grounding contact when emotions escalate
- Remaining close during overwhelming moments
- Providing calming focus that helps the child regain regulation

Reflection

After reading these examples, consider:

- Which areas feel most relevant to your child right now?
- Where do you imagine a service dog helping the most?
- What changes would make the biggest difference for your family?

Taking time to think through these questions can also help you clearly explain why you are pursuing and fundraising for a service dog when talking with friends, family members, and potential supporters.

Many families find that putting this into words helps others better understand both the challenges their child experiences and the meaningful ways a service dog may provide support.