

Evaluation of the integration of service dogs in the lives of children and adults with physical disability - Executive Summary

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Background: Children and adults with physical disabilities are dependent on their immediate surroundings for daily activities. A service dog is a dog trained to aid with motor activities and physical needs. [Little Steps Association](#) together with the National Insurance Institute (Bituach Leumi) initiated a preliminary program to examine the influence of service dogs on the lives' of children and adults with motor disability. The evaluation addressed issues relating to sense of ability, independence, the lowering of load and burden from their families and the improvement of social involvement. An evaluation process accompanied the project.

Participants: 15 families (10 dogs were destined for children and five for adults). All participants were with a physical disability, and without a cognitive disability. There was a gender representation, wide age range and a variety of diagnosis and levels of functioning. Furthermore, there was a nationwide spread with representation of both Jewish (secular and religious) and Arab sectors.

Methodology: a "before-mid- after" design in order to enable comparison. Mixed method methodology included face-to-face interviews and a quantitative questionnaire. A mid-term evaluation was also performed six months after the dog entered the home. In cases where the dog was destined for a child, one parent was interviewed, in addition to the child (children under 10 were not interviewed in concern for emotional overload). The gathering of data was over a period of 3.5 years. During the evaluation period, the Covid-19 pandemic erupted, which influenced the method of data gathering (switch to phone interviews/zoom calls etc.).

Performance status: 12 families fully concluded the evaluation process. One family returned the dog.

Evaluation tools: interview guidelines that included open questions regarding experiences, feelings, needs, expectations and fears from taking on a service dog. In addition, the quantitative questionnaires that were used were based on existing validated questionnaires that were modified for this purpose.

Primary findings:

1. **Barriers and inhibitory factors for taking a service dog**– child's age, siblings' reaction and family's structure.
2. **Concerns regarding the entrance of a service dog into the house (preliminary to the dog's entry)** – the main concern was of the heavy responsibility for the dog's needs, which will cause a big change in everyday life, and add burden. Another concern was that the dependence on the dog might impair the owner's independence. Other concerns brought up: will the dog fulfill its expectations or will it disappoint? Logistic concerns (travel, holidays, car rides etc.), and fear from the "day after" the dog's death. Most claimed that the reward and benefit from the dog surpassed the financial burden and the effect on cleanness and hygiene. In the Muslim Arab society there was also the coping with the cultural reluctance of taking in a dog.
3. **Expectations and needs from service dogs (before the dog entered)** – variety of needs and expectations shifting between physical, emotional and social needs; needs that reflect on the person with disability to those that reflect on his family and surroundings`, and covert vs. overt needs. Most of the needs were expressed by all participants, albeit in different intensities and expressions.
4. **Physical needs:** are the most prominent and dominant ones. They refer mainly to the gross motor skills – mobility assistance (climbing stairs, walking on uneven surfaces, maintaining balance, lift up assistance etc.) These have implications on physical safety (prevention of falls), prevention of pain, emotional security and the improvement of life quality.

Emotional needs: some referred to a **specific issue** (such as improving the mood) while others described an **emotional process**. The most prominent expression was the need for independence that had a different representation amongst children, parents and adults. The responsibility over a dog provided a sense of control (in a reality of lack of control), and in so empowered and provided a sense of capability. Other expressions of emotional needs: mood improvement, sense of security, coping



with frustrations, encouraging activity, acceptance of medical condition and the meaningful and deep relationship with the dog ("team").

Social needs: most of the respondents referred to the need of a "friend" and were less inclined to refer to the dog as a "social bridge".

Other needs: medical needs (monitoring and alerting) and need of security and safety (supervision when inside or outside the house).

5. Meeting of needs and expectations (within a year of dog's entry) – needs that were

fully met: gross motor needs, emotional need as a mood enhancement, a need for a friend, sense of security and medical needs. **Needs that were partially met:** physical needs in daily activities, emotional need for independence, developing sense of responsibility (children) and other emotional needs. **Needs that were not met:** social bridge.

6. Differences between adults and children – noticeable differences were found in the meeting of needs and expectations between adults and children:

Children – a complex picture that was influenced by chronological age, emotional age (maturity) and the family's commitment. The more mature the child was (chronologically and emotionally), thus the integration of the dog in daily life, fulfillment of needs and contributions was more meaningful. Young children (up to the age of 15-16) found it difficult to maintain the responsibility and commitment to the dog, perceived the dog as a burden, did not regularly take it to school/activities and had difficulty in maintaining the dog's abilities and capabilities for which he was trained for (opening doors, fetching things etc.). The responsibility for the dog's care was shared with the rest of the household members, which sometimes weakened the relationship between the child and the dog. In families where children's physical functions were still preserved, there was often a preference for doing things alone. For most of them, the dog mainly answered for emotional needs and need for a friend, and less for functional needs. In contrast, the older children (16+) tended to respond in a more adult like fashion, though not fully.

Adults – most expressed high satisfaction and noted that the dog significantly contributed to their quality of life. The dog was included in their daily activities and accompanied them (almost) everywhere. They were the sole caregivers and the ones tending to the dog's needs. The dog fulfilled their functional (motor and medical) and emotional needs. The social needs were less dominant amongst adults. Just one adult mentioned that although a deep emotional connection was formed, the dog did not



meet his expectations. All adults stated they would repeat their decision to take a service dog and would recommend it to others in their condition.

7. **Connection with the dog** – the attachment process was almost immediate and grew stronger throughout the year. The dog was referred to as a family member or other close figure. The dog held a very significant emotional role in his owners life (child and adult), and of the family's in general. The findings of the quantitative attachment questionnaire reinforce these results.
8. **Difficulties after entering the dog** – difficulties that were related to the dog directly (caring for its needs, setting of boundaries, preserving capabilities etc.); difficulties within the family and home (cleaning the house, burden on the parents, tensions etc.); personal challenges (the intensity of the bond with the dog, the dependence on him, the need to compromise on things that were less suited for the dog); and difficulties in face of the surrounding (dealing with questions, setting of boundaries, entering public places etc.). Still, most of the participants concluded that the benefits from the service dog outweighed the difficulties and disadvantages.
9. The small sample of participants did not allow for significant differences between populations and the two time points (before and after the dog's entrance).

Conclusions

1. **Reinforcing sense of ability and improving independence** - There was a distinction between young children and older children. Amongst young children (up to the ages of 15-16) the goals of the project were only partially fulfilled. After the initial enthusiasm, the dog was often perceived as a burden (the child was not free to play during breaks, had to take care of the dog, etc.). The dog did not fully accompany the child, and he was not the primary caretaker for it. In light of that, the dog did not provide the child with a significant feeling of independence and ability. Among the older children (16+ years old), there was a degree of improvement in their sense of independence since the dog enabled them to stay / leave the house without the presence of an adult. This is because the dog accompanies them throughout most of the day and they shared in its care. Amongst adults, the service dogs also improved their sense of ability and independence (parameters that existed before).
2. **Reduction of burden from family members** - There was no significant reduction in burden. The child continued to be assisted by the parent, whether out of habit or because it was more convenient. In addition, parents had a role in the day-to-day care



of the dog. However most parents were willing to "absorb" the burden in light of the benefits and advantages that the dog brought with it.

3. **Improving social engagement** - This goal has not been achieved. The dog did not constitute a bridge to social connections and it was not apparent that its presence had expanded their social circle. When there was an interaction with the surrounding due to the dog, this was not always a positive one (owner was forced to deal with questions, setting boundaries, etc.). Yet at the same time, the dog helped to communicate the "disabilities" which was sometimes difficult to do in words. For all participants the dog was a true friend, and a deep and meaningful emotional bond of partnership and mutual accountability was built.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that while service dogs had reached and fulfilled the project goals with adults, with children this was not the case. The age of the child, his emotional maturity and the character of the family, were significant factors for the integration of the service dog into the home.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended to examine the inclusion of service dogs in the package of services for adults who meet the criteria. It will be important to make a broader assessment of the adult population.
2. With children, the dog mainly fulfilled emotional needs (friend, emotional security, etc.). There is room to examine what type of dogs are suitable to give this answer and see if it is possible to build a "simpler and cheaper" training program, holding in mind that in the future it may be necessary to develop the dog's skills into those of a service dog. "Pet" dogs provide emotional components, and there is countless evidence, research, and documentation of this. There may be room to encourage and recommend such a relationship.
3. In the pilot performed, the dog gave a full solution to medical needs (monitoring and alerting), and the physical and emotional needs that result. In accordance, it is recommended to expand research / evaluation among people with medical disabilities.