

A dog for Katie

How an AUTISM SERVICE DOG is making a difference in a young girl's life

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PHOTOS BY SUZANNE BIRD

A happy, outgoing eight-year-old, Katie Peruzzo is in the third grade, enjoys shopping for pretty dresses, and likes to eat hamburgers. "She runs instead of walking and bounces instead of standing still," explains her mom, Lorraine. But until recently, Katie had to be strapped into a stroller during outings, and Lorraine didn't dare turn her back on her daughter for even a moment.



Katie was born small and had issues with feeding. “At six months of age, she couldn’t hold her head up,” Lorraine explains. “At 10 months, she couldn’t sit on her own or grasp an object in her hands.” Her doctor referred her for testing – the diagnosis: tetrasomy 18p, a rare chromosomal abnormality that affects brain development and causes a host of other health problems such as high/low muscle tone, digestive problems and seizures.

Katie also has autistic tendencies, lacks social boundaries and is a major flight risk. “She may teeter, toddle and trip when she’s walking,” Lorraine says, “but she’s like a bullet when she runs.” Katie’s tendency to take off, coupled with her naïve trust of strangers, led her parents to consider a service dog. They did their research and contacted several agencies – but only one offered to help them out.

A service dog can improve safety for a child with autism by preventing them from bolting into traffic or wandering off. The dogs also have a calming effect, helping to diffuse tantrums, and they act as an icebreaker where the public might otherwise avoid contact. But perhaps most importantly, an autism service dog offers a child who has special needs the unconditional love and companionship only a dog can provide.

Invaluable support

Wade Beattie, founder of Ontario-based Autism Dog Services, paid a visit to the Peruzzos’ home to assess Katie’s condition and discuss the family’s expectations. “Wade sees a family in need and doesn’t discriminate,” says Lorraine, whose request had been turned down by another school because Katie’s condition was not specifically defined as autism. In addition to an open mind, Beattie also brought a dog – but it wasn’t love at first sight for Katie. “She was frightened,” Lorraine recalls, but Beattie saw potential and they scheduled a second visit. His instincts paid off and Katie took to the dog immediately, going right up to it and expressing fascination with its face.

Dogs in Beattie’s program are raised in volunteer foster homes where they learn manners and are socialized to things they’ll encounter as working service dogs – such as people, malls, vehicles and other animals. At about 15 months of age, they begin their formal training; but instead of moving into a kennel for the next four to six months, they move in with Beattie, who has three to five dogs-in-training at home at any given time. After more than 20 years training guide and service dogs, he believes that kenneling causes stress and makes



Around her waist, **Katie** wears a special belt that is tethered to **Amber’s** harness.

it difficult for dogs to settle down and learn. “When they live at home with you, you get to know them inside and out,” he adds, “and there are no surprises when you place them with families later on.”

None of the kids in the program are independent enough to handle a dog on their own, so parents control the dog when it’s working. Before a dog could be selected for Katie, Lorraine began attending weekly classes where she learned more about the program, got hands-on experience with the dogs, and met other parents who were living with challenges similar to her own. The support parents provide for each other is invaluable, Beattie explains, and Lorraine couldn’t agree more, adding that it’s a relief to meet others who understand what it’s like to raise a child with special needs.

The right match

Finding the right dog is a gradual process and can sometimes take several tries. “You’re not just looking for a match for the child,” Beattie says. “The dog has to fit in with the whole family.” The first dog he placed with the Peruzzos was a black Labrador Retriever named ‘Pepsi.’ “I loved him,” Lorraine admits, but he was too laid back for Katie, who overwhelmed the dog with her super-high energy. Lorraine cried when Pepsi left, but she knew he wasn’t right for her daughter.

They needed a dog that could match Katie’s enthusiasm, so Beattie’s next candidate was ‘Amber.’ A yellow Lab with energy to spare, it hadn’t taken Amber long to wear out her welcome with her first foster family. “She required a daily hike and swim just to get through the day,” recalls volunteer Karen Partington, who took over when Amber was seven months old. Katie and Amber were introduced at a training class and the two hit it off like old pals. “Katie walked over to Amber, grabbed the harness and just started to walk with her,” Partington recalls. Katie had found her match.

Amber went home with the Peruzzos for a trial period, and once everyone agreed she was the one, it was Lorraine’s turn to be trained.

Beattie’s program consists of one-on-one training for families in their own home combined with weekly group classes at local malls. Lorraine learned everything that Amber had been taught, and began to bond with the dog who would become her daughter’s closest companion. Once mother and dog were working well together, Beattie began to incorporate Katie into the lessons.



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Interested in donating or volunteering to raise a dog for a child with special needs? Go to www.autismdogservices.ca for information about how to get involved.

A world of difference

When they’re out in public, Lorraine holds the leash attached to Amber’s collar. One of an autism service dog’s most important jobs is preventing the child from bolting, so around her waist Katie wears a special belt that is tethered to Amber’s harness. If she wishes, Katie can also hold onto a short leash clipped to the harness – and when she does, as far as she’s concerned, she’s the one walking her dog.

According to Lorraine, going from riding in a stroller to walking her own dog is a huge step for Katie, providing her with independence and self-esteem. It also provides a mother with peace of mind – Lorraine can now tell Amber to ‘stay’ while she checks the size and price on back-to-school clothes without worrying that her daughter will be gone when she turns around. “Amber acts as an anchor,” Lorraine says. Katie can pull all she likes, but with Amber standing firm and mom at the end of the leash, she won’t get very far. Amber also distracts Katie from compulsive and self-destructive behaviours, and has helped her learn not to hug or pat too tightly. “She doesn’t realize her own strength,” explains Lorraine. “We’ve been trying for years to help her understand, but after one summer with Amber, she’s learning how to be gentle.”

The final test for an autism service dog is the Public Access Test. Designed by Assistance Dogs International to ensure that service dogs are well behaved and unobtrusive in public, the test emphasizes handler control and includes getting in and out of a vehicle, passing through doorways, and sitting in a restaurant.

Amber is still working toward her certification – “She stills has a few issues with greeting people and dogs,” Lorraine explains – but she has already made a world of difference to one little girl and her family. ●