

Autism Service Dog

Description and Definitions

Disability Definition (ADA Part 36.105 (a) (1) (i)):

“Disability means, with respect to an individual: A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual.”

ADA Service Animal Definition (ADA Part 35.104):

“A service animal means any dog that is individually trained to do **work** or perform **tasks** for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability.”

Autism Spectrum Disorder Definition:

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a life-long complex neurodevelopment disorder that affects daily functioning and is accompanied by significant deficits in communication, daily living and adaptive skills, social interaction, relationship development, coping skills, long-term planning, and executive functioning, along with restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. Many individuals on the autism spectrum also have other co-occurring conditions such as Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, Gastrointestinal (GI) disorders, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, dyspraxia, and other related conditions.

Overview of an Autism Service Dog:

An Autism Service Dog can assist in calming and grounding an individual on the autism spectrum via tactile or deep pressure therapy. They can help alert or interrupt anxiety or self harming behavior. They assist in developing social, communication and other life skills, learning responsibility and empathy, and maintaining boundaries. They can also assist with personal safety, minimizing wandering, and provide a sense of security and independence. The role of the Autism Service Dog is to help mitigate one or more symptoms of autism spectrum disorder to allow an individual to participate more fully in their daily life activities. The handler is likely to be a child but could be older, may or may not show visible signs of disability, and may or may not be verbal. For a child, the dog will often have a team of child + parent handlers.

Gear:

Per ADA law, service dogs are not required to wear any identifying gear or tags. Often service dog teams will choose to utilize identifying gear for ease of public acceptance and to minimize questioning, but this is not required and cannot be requested by any business or public facility.

Training & Certification:

By law, there is no required training criteria, testing, certification, or registration for Service Dogs. A Service Dog can be trained by a professional dog trainer, or by the handler/owner. A very high level of obedience and public behavior is expected, and animals must be housebroken. Task and work training is very specific to the needs of the individual and therefore specific work and tasks are not prescribed by law. Any certification or registration cards or documents are for information purposes only and are not legal documents, may not be requested by any business or public facility, and the disabled individual and their service animal cannot be denied access due to lack of such documents.

Service Animal Work vs. Tasks:

The difference between work and tasks is not specifically defined in the ADA, the law only says that the dog must be trained to do **work or tasks** that benefit the disabled individual. In both service dog work and tasks, the dog must be trained to recognize and respond to cues. When the trained recognition and response mitigates an individual's disability, that pair of actions is a “service”—a piece of service dog work or a task.

Autism Service Dog Work and Tasks

If the intentional cue comes from the handler, like a voice or hand command, the dog is completing a task when recognizing and responding to it.

If the cue is not an intentional command from the handler, the dog's recognition and response, or in some cases the presence of the dog which allows the disabled person use of the dog's body (for tactile stimulation, physical support, etc.) would be service dog work.

Work	Task
Open Ended	Discrete
On Call	On Demand
Ongoing	One Time
Passively Available	Actively Requested

Work and Task List

Assistive Behavior	Symptoms Alleviated	Work or Task?	Task Command	Description
Deep Pressure Therapy	Anxiety Sensory Overload	Both	Examples: Paws Up Lean On Lay On	Dog places all or part of body on the handler for calming . Provides proprioceptive input to help organize & calm the sensory system. Helps slow heart rate and breathing, decreases fight or flight response. Minimizes the severity and duration of an anxiety or panic attack or autistic meltdown or shutdown.
Grounding	Anxiety Sensory Overload Stress Catatonic Behavior	Both	Touch Hug Kiss Snuggle	Any kind of physical contact with handler's body to refocus their attention - touch hand, sit on feet, lick face or hand, paws on lap, head on lap or shoulder, etc.
Alert or Interrupt	Panic Anxiety	Work		Licking, pawing, or otherwise physically engaging and distracting handler to alleviate anxiety.
Tactile / Sensory Stimulation	Anxiety Sensory overload	Task	Come Sit	Dog comes to the handler to act as tool for tactile sensory input.
Initiate Interpersonal Interactions	Social withdrawal, difficulty initiating social interactions	Work		Dog acts as both an introductory tool and a topic of conversation that the child is comfortable with and easily able to participate in. Facilitates social interaction which otherwise is difficult and limiting for autistic people.
Blocking	Anxiety Panic Sensory Overload	Task	Block Cover Closer	Dog places body between handler and other people or other potential stressful interactions. Useful in crowds or situations when close proximity of other people, touching, bumping, etc. can cause anxiety or panic.
Visual grounding	Anxiety Sensory overload Disorientation Confusion	Both	Here	Dog keeps constant eye contact to allow the child to focus on animal instead of the stressor in the environment.
Nighttime safety	Night waking / wandering	Work		Dog alerts parents when child is up/awake at night
Wake up	Sleeping through alarm, refusal to get out of bed	Work		Licks, nudges, or otherwise wakes handler, provides motivation to get out of bed.
Help with sleep	Difficulty getting / staying asleep	Work		Provides calming weight on bed - like a weighted blanket - to help a child sleep. Can also act as a source of security for a child with night terrors.

Handler lays on dog	Anxiety, sensory overload	Task	Down Stay	Dog lays down and allows handler to lay head or part of body on his body. Handler can calm with the feel of the dogs fur, warmth of the body, rhythm of the heartbeat, and regulate breathing to match dog's breathing
Nudge	Repetitive or self harming behavior	Work		Persistent nuzzling of the hands to interrupt nail/ finger chewing or other repetitive or harmful behavior.
Physical safety - streets		Work		Helps keep the child safe at streets and intersections - stop at every street crossing, reminding child to stop, steer child away from cars and traffic.
Guarding	Safety during an autistic meltdown.	Work		Can guard & protect child during an autistic meltdown in public.
Carrying items	Hypotonia, fine motor delays, confusion.	Work		Can carry personal items for the child in a pack. Autistic children with hypotonia, poor coordination, and fine motor delays have a hard time holding on to things for a long period of time or coordinating holding multiple items in the hands.
Retrieve / Fetch	Executive function, motor planning	Task	Get Fetch	Can pick up dropped items, remind child of items needed before leaving, etc. Autistic individuals can have trouble organizing and remembering what they need, and can often be clumsy.
Independence	Confusion, overwhelm	Work		The dog can allow the child to walk independently without holding on to a parent's hand. This allows for a feeling of independence and security without having to be tethered to an adult. Often autistic children can be easily confused or lost in busy public spaces, this can create anxiety and a need for the child to tether him/herself for security.
Focal point	Preventing sensory overload	Work		The dog gives the child something to focus on in an overwhelming environment, to help tune out the overwhelming sensory input and help to prevent sensory overload or meltdown.
Develop empathy	Difficulty processing emotions	Work		Autistic children often have a hard time connecting with other people's emotions, but learning to care for a dog can help them develop empathy for another.
Help with difficult transitions	Overwhelming change	Work		Autistic children have a difficult time with changes and transitions, from activity, places, plans, etc. The dog can be a constant presence to ground the child no matter what other changes are happening.
Reassuring presence	Anxiety	Work		The presence of the dog allows the child to feel more safe and secure in his environment, allowing him to feel more confident in venturing into new and unfamiliar places.
Enhances verbal communication skills	Expressive language delay	Work		Learning simple verbal commands can help facilitate language processing and learning.
Physical contact	Sensory sensitivities	Work		Autistic children often don't allow physical contact, but they will allow dog to touch, which helps gradually desensitize them to physical contact.
Physical health	Exercise	Work		Walking the dog provides a means for physical activity and exercise for a person who might otherwise be sedentary.

Following are example training standards for the AKC Canine Good Citizen Test, and the IADP Public Access Test. These are tests that are commonly used to measure a dog's level of public obedience, although no tests are required by law. These are here as examples only, to help understand the ideal obedience level to which most service dog handlers and organizations feel that a service dog should be trained. But again, the ADA law does not mandate specific training standards.

AKC Canine Good Citizen Test

Training Standards:

THE CGC TEST INCLUDES:

Accepting a friendly stranger

The dog will allow a friendly stranger to approach it and speak to the handler in a natural, everyday situation.

Sitting Politely for Petting

The dog will allow a friendly stranger to pet it while it is out with its handler.

Appearance and Grooming

The dog will permit someone to check it's ears and front feet, as a groomer or veterinarian would do.

Out for a Walk (walking on a loose lead)

Following the evaluator's instructions, the dog will walk on a loose lead (with the handler/owner).

Walking Through a Crowd

This test demonstrates that the dog can move about politely in pedestrian traffic and is under control in public places. The dog and handler walk around and pass close to several people (at least three).

Sit and Down on Command and Staying in Place

The dog must do sit AND down on command, then the owner chooses the position for leaving the dog in the stay.

Coming When Called

This test demonstrates that the dog will come when called by the handler (from 10 feet on a leash).

Reaction to Another Dog

This test demonstrates that the dog can behave politely around other dogs. Two handlers and their dogs approach each other from a distance of about 20 feet, stop, shake hands and exchange pleasantries.

Reaction to Distraction

The evaluator will select and present two distractions such as dropping a chair, etc.

Supervised Separation

This test demonstrates that a dog can be left with a trusted person, if necessary, and will maintain training and good manners. Evaluators are encouraged to say something like, "Would you like me to watch your dog?" and then take hold of the dog's leash. The owner will go out of sight for three minutes. The dog does not have to stay in position but should not continually bark, whine, or pace unnecessarily, or show anything stronger than mild agitation or nervousness. Evaluators may talk to the dog but should not engage in excessive talking, petting, or management attempts (e.g, "there, there, it's alright").

IIADP Public Access Certification Test

A = Always

M = Most of the time (more than half the time)

S = Some of the time (half or less of the time)

N = Never

1. CONTROLLED UNLOAD OUT OF VEHICLE

Dog did not try to leave vehicle until given the release command.

YES* NO The dog waited in the vehicle until released.*

YES NO The dog waited outside the vehicle under control.

YES NO The dog remained under control while another dog was walked past.

2. APPROACHING THE BUILDING

Relative heel position, not straining or forging.

A M S N The dog stayed in relative heel position.

YES* NO The dog was calm around traffic.*

A M S N The dog stopped when the individual came to a halt.

3. CONTROLLED ENTRY THROUGH A DOORWAY

YES* NO The dog waited quietly at the door until commanded to enter*

YES* NO The dog waited on the inside until able to return to heel position.*

4. HEELING THROUGH THE BUILDING

A M S N The dog was within the prescribed distance of the individual.

A M S N The dog ignored the public, remaining focused on the individual.

A M S N The dog readily adjusted to speed changes.

A M S N The dog readily turned corners-did not have to be tugged or jerked to change direction.

A M S N The dog readily maneuvered through tight quarters.

5. SIX FOOT RECALL ON LEAD

YES* NO Responded readily to the recall command - did not stray away, seek attention from others, or trudge slowly.*

YES* NO The dog remained under control and focused on the individual*

YES* NO The dog came within the prescribed distance of the individual.*

YES* NO The dog came directly to the individual.*

6. SITS ON COMMAND

A M S N The dog responded promptly to the command to sit.

YES* NO The dog remained under control around food - not trying to get food and not needing repeated corrections.*

YES* NO The dog remained composed while the shopping cart passed – did not shy away, show signs of fear, etc. The shopping cart should be pushed normally and reasonably, not dramatically.*

YES* NO The dog maintained a sit-stay while being petted by a stranger.*

7. DOWNES ON COMMAND

A M S N The dog responded promptly to the command to down.

YES* NO The dog remained under the control around the food - not trying to get food and not needing repeated corrections.*

YES* NO The dog remained in control while the child approached – child should not taunt dog or be overly dramatic.*

8. NOISE DISTRACTIONS

If the dog jumps, turns, or shows a quick startle type reaction that is fine. The dog should not show fear, aggression, or continue to be affected by the noise.

YES* NO The dog remained composed during the noise distraction.*

9. RESTAURANT

YES* NO The dog is unobtrusive and out of the way of patrons and employees as much as possible.*

YES* NO The dog maintained proper behavior, ignoring food and being quiet.*

10. OFF LEAD

YES* NO When told to drop the leash, the team maintained control and the individual got the leash back in position.*

11. DOG TAKEN BY ANOTHER PERSON

YES* NO Another person can take the dog's leash and the dog's partner can move away without aggression or undue stress on the part of the dog.

12. CONTROLLED EXIT

A M S N The dog stayed in relative heel position.

YES* NO The dog was calm around traffic.*

A M S N The dog stopped when the individual came to a halt.

13. CONTROLLED LOAD INTO VEHICLE

YES NO The dog waited until commanded to enter the vehicle.

YES NO The dog readily entered the vehicle upon command.

14. TEAM RELATIONSHIP

A M S N When the dog did well, the person praised the dog.

A M S N The dog is relaxed, confident, and friendly.

A M S N The person kept the dog under control.

YES NO The person was prepared with proper working materials and equipment in case of an access confrontation (laws, etc.)