

April 22, 2009

Autism Assistance Dogs

December 2008 brought a glimmer of hope to a household in Adelaide - and it came in the form of a loveable black Lab.

The household, consisting of stay-at-home mother Coby and her two precious sons, was under great stress, but the addition of an autism assistance dog named Fremont has made all the difference.

Fremont has endeared himself to the family and is particularly impacting the life of five-year-old Bhodi, who has Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Bhodi and Fremont are participating in a pilot program by Guide Dogs SA.NT designed to evaluate the effectiveness of assistance dogs working with children living with autism.

Guide Dog Services Manager Tracey Jones says there are many similarities between training guide dogs and autism assistance dogs and similar programs in other overseas guide dog schools had been successful.

“We have been evaluating puppies at about 12-14 months of age to determine which ones should stay on the Guide Dog Development Program and which should be channelled into the Autism Assistance Dog pilot program.

“Not every dog has the skills and personality to become a guide dog and it’s a way of utilising their considerable training into a purposeful career. Eventually, we may breed puppies specifically for the program.”

Mrs Jones says Bhodi has gone ahead in leaps and bounds since Fremont’s arrival and the family has even managed to go on several outings, something that was previously an impossible dream.

Bhodi, like many children living with autism, has a tendency to run away when anxious or stressed. However, all outings now include Fremont, who is tethered to Bhodi by a belt system and acts as an anchor should he attempt to run away. Coby also has physical control of the dog via a leash and collar.

Fremont is trained to stop at all kerbs, steps and stairs and also responds to Coby.

Guide Dogs Association of SA and NT Inc | Full member of the International Guide Dog Federation

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“It’s changed the whole dimension of going out. Previously I would have had a vice-like grip on Bhodi’s hand. Now he can’t run away and instead of becoming stressed in unfamiliar situations is now looking out for Fremont. It’s a win-win situation,” says Coby.

Even home security is no longer the big issue it used to be with Fremont blocking the front door to prevent Bhodi running away.

Coby says Fremont’s presence had also helped calm her seven-year-old son Lane, who has Asperger’s Syndrome, a specific type of Autism.

Bhodi has already started Reception at a mainstream State primary school, but due to funding problems can only attend on a part-time basis. The school is very keen to assist Bhodi and is investigating how they can possibly incorporate Fremont into a classroom situation.

Anyone wanting to know more about Guide Dogs SA.NT’s Autism Assistance Dog Program should contact Guide Dog Services on 8203 8333.

Press inquiries: Media and Communications Officer Amanda Nes – 8203 8343 or 0420 939 649.