

The Lifecycle of an Assistance Dog

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Definitions

Assistance animal

- *performs at least one identifiable task or behaviour to help a person with a disability to mitigate the impacts of that disability,*
- *trained to a high standard of behaviour and hygiene appropriate to access public spaces that are prohibited to most animals.*

Examples: guide dogs, medical alert animals, hearing assistance animals, mobility assistance animals, psychiatric assistance animals, and assistance animals for developmental disorders

Legal protections: necessary disability support

Emotional support animal

lives with and provides emotional benefit and/or support for the person, as confirmed by an appropriate qualified health care professional.

Therapy animal

included into the work of a qualified health professional in the provision of a structured, goal-directed treatment



Where do assistance dogs come from?

- 🐕 Breeding/Sourcing – different models depending on organisation
 - 🐕 In-house breeding programs – large, well-established providers
 - 🐕 Work with specific breeders
 - 🐕 Sourced from shelters
 - 🐕 Existing pet dogs (i.e., owner-trained)
- 🐕 Desired traits
 - 🐕 Intelligence
 - 🐕 Physical health
 - 🐕 ‘Bomb-proof’ temperament
 - 🐕 Motivated to work



Future assistance dog – maybe

Sourcing– which is best?

- 🐕 What does the research tell us?
 - 🐕 Puppy tests predicting success ^[1]
 - 🐕 Very little positive predictive value (which dogs will succeed)
 - 🐕 Better negative predictive value (which dogs will fail)
 - 🐕 Generally high failures rates: 30% to 70%
 - 🐕 No clear variation by source
 - 🐕 Most research focuses on in-house breeding programs
 - 🐕 No obvious ideal source

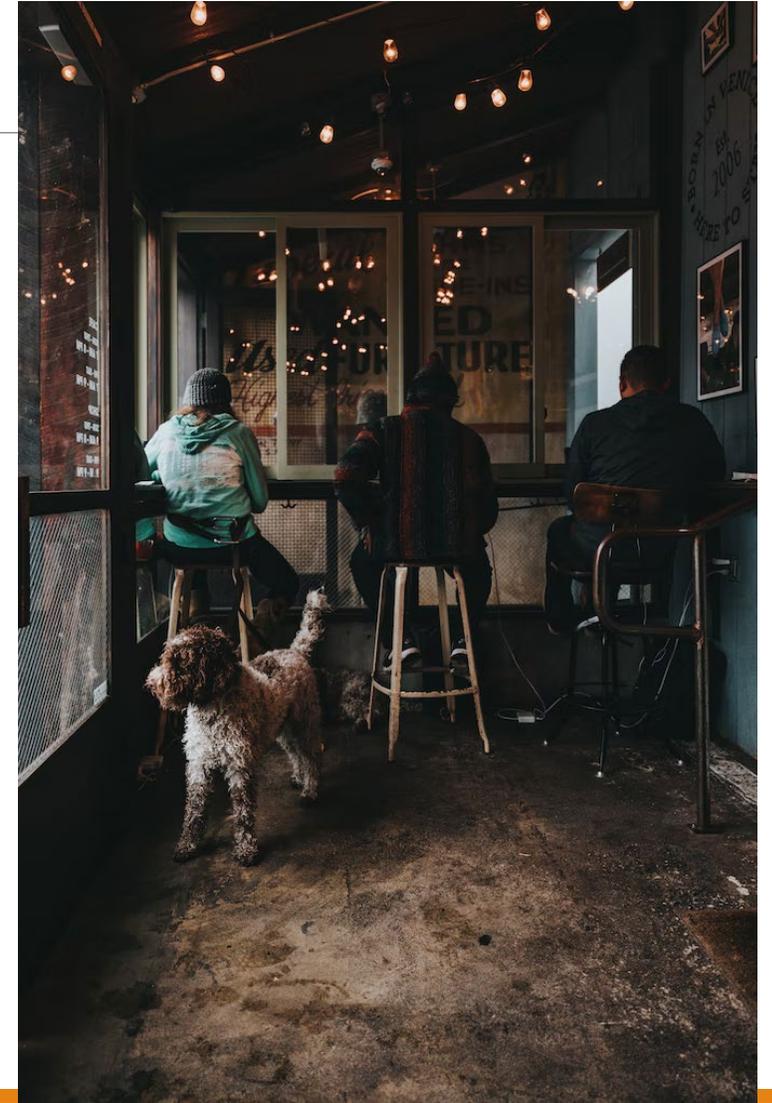
1. Bremhorst, Annika, et al. *Animals* 8.8 (2018): 129.

Welfare touchpoint – sourcing

Source	Pros	Cons
In-house breeding program	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Completely controlled genetic lines• Extensive, multi-generational breeding for desired traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limited genetic stock
Specific breeders	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Partially controlled genetic lines• More variability in genetic stock	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Possibly less reliable genetically• Breeders may not want to make all puppies available to assistance dog provider (e.g., sells privately too, keeps best puppies for breeding program)
Shelters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• LOTS of available dogs• Saves a dog's life• Possible hybrid vigour	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• History unknown• Temperament/personality unclear until after some time away from shelter• Possible lack of socialisation during puppyhood
Pet dogs (owner-trained)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• LOTS of available dogs• Bond already established with owner• Possible hybrid vigour	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Temperament needs assessment – not all suitable• Possible lack of socialisation during puppyhood

Training assistance dogs

- 🐕 Training
 - 🐕 Basic training
 - 🐕 8 weeks to 12-14 months old
 - 🐕 Socialisation
 - 🐕 Public access permitted
 - 🐕 Basic obedience
 - 🐕 Learning to be a 'good canine citizen'

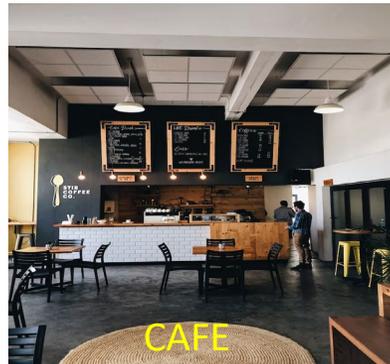
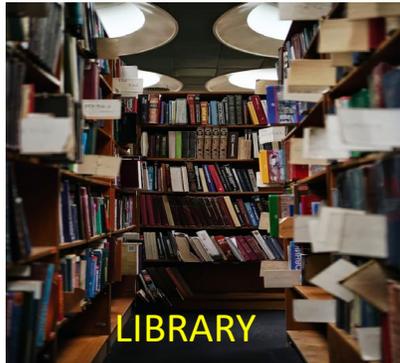


Training assistance dogs

SOCIALISATION

Important for all puppies [1,2]

Critical for assistance dog puppies [3]



1. Howell, Tiffani J., Tammie King, and Pauleen C. Bennett. *Veterinary Medicine: Research and Reports* 6 (2015): 143
2. Howell, Tiffani J., and Pauleen C. Bennett. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior* 6.3 (2011): 195-204.
3. Mai, Dac L., et al. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior* 42 (2021): 1-10.

Training assistance dogs

- 🐕 Training
 - 🐕 Disability specific task training
 - 🐕 12-14 months and beyond
 - 🐕 Tasks to mitigate effects of owner's disability
 - 🐕 (not cure, not solve – just mitigate)

Welfare touchpoint – training

Training

Puppy raising programs

 Research by former PhD student Dac Loc (Jimmy) Mai ^[1-4]

 Critical components: Peer support and support from training organisation

Shelter adoptions

 Extensive training may be required to ‘update’ socialisation

Owner-trained assistance dogs

 As with shelter adoptions re: socialisation

 Owner typically works with a training provider

1. Mai, Dac L., et al. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior* 42 (2021): 1-10.
2. Mai, Dac, et al. *Animals* 10.1 (2020): 128.
3. Mai, Dac L., et al. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 236 (2021): 105259.
4. Mai, Dac, et al. *Animals* 11.5 (2021): 1195.

Welfare touchpoint – assistance dog working life

Reviews by Foltin and Glenk (2023) ^[3] and Salmon et al (2022) ^[4]

- 🐕 Welfare rarely included in legislation governing assistance animal issues
- 🐕 Training/integration process reportedly stressful for owners, may also be stressful for the dogs
- 🐕 Behavioural indicators in autism assistance dogs
 - 🐕 Meltdowns especially stressful for dogs
 - 🐕 Lack of routine, lack of rest periods, unpredictable behaviour by child
- 🐕 Emotional contagion among psychiatric assistance dogs a consideration
 - 🐕 No increase in long-term or short-term cortisol measures in working assistance dogs for veterans with PTSD.
 - 🐕 No evidence of increased stress due to working role

Welfare considerations for working life

Welfare concern	Assistance dogs	Pet dogs
Inadequate rest time	✓	X
Unintentional mistreatment	✓	✓
Lack of routine	✓	X
Not enough play	✓	✓
Overfeeding	✓	✓
Harness not ergonomic – unnecessary strain	✓	?
Insufficient places to toilet dogs (e.g., in public transport venues)	✓	?
Public transport places not dog friendly (e.g., dog falls through gap between train and platform)	✓	?
Boredom	X	✓
Infrequent interactions with owner (e.g., always in the backyard)	X	✓

Welfare touchpoint – assistance dog retirement

Limited research, mostly focusing on impact on handler.

One position paper with advice. ^[1]

- 🐕 Dogs unfortunately get old
 - 🐕 Physical and cognitive abilities for work change
- 🐕 Owner/handler must decide when to retire animal
 - 🐕 Often aided by training organisation

- 🐕 Dogs may not view retirement as an escape from a tough job
 - 🐕 Ideally – the dog would have loved it all along
- 🐕 ‘semi-retirement’ can aid transition
 - 🐕 Full retirement – in home with owner or in new home as adopted pet

Welfare touchpoint – assistance dog retirement

- 🐕 If remaining in owner's home:
 - 🐕 Separation anxiety may appear
 - 🐕 Arrival of a new dog may be stressful
- 🐕 If going to a new home as a pet
 - 🐕 Transition may be difficult
- 🐕 Should not mean a sedentary, isolated lifestyle – especially for dogs accustomed to extensive stimulation

Welfare touchpoints – summary

Throughout dog's entire life, welfare needs do not go away and must remain top priority

Want to learn more?



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