

# Special Interest Section Quarterly

# Developmental Disabilities

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## Embarking on the Future: Gaining Vocational and Leisure Skills in an Assistance Dog Training Program, Part 2

■ Melissa Y. Winkle, OTR/L, and Jill Felice, Assistance Dog Trainer

*In the December Quarterly, we described the Adelante program in which the job of caring for and training assistance dogs can be a vocational opportunity for clients with developmental disabilities. The program offers two levels of dog training opportunities: social trainers and task trainers. In December, we discussed social trainers; we begin now with the task trainers.*

### Population Served

**Task Trainers.** Task trainers attend the program 4 days a week for approximately 5 hours per day. Every task trainer has met certain criteria, which include: (a) day programming at least 20 hours per week; (b) an interest and the potential to participate in community work or volunteer opportunities related to animals; (c) moderate- to high-functioning physical or cognitive disabilities; and (d) the need for occupational therapy intervention. Each task trainer takes responsibility for a specific puppy and works with it for 6 to 12 months under the guidance of the assistance dog trainer and occupational therapist. A basic curriculum, developed and taught by both the assistance dog trainer and the occupational therapist, is followed. The occupational therapist adapts and modifies the curriculum daily to meet both group and individual needs. Program participants learn basic dog handling, feeding, grooming, and obedience skills in a hands-on, structured learning environment. Direct dog contact and training typically occur for the first 2 hours of the day. While the puppies enjoy late-morning naps, program participants work on ADL's, IADL's, educational activities, and client factors in the form of dog-related fun. These activities are led by the occupational therapist and assisting staff. The clients also enjoy community outings where they observe and participate in real animal-related work settings, such as stores, restaurants, recreational sites, and public transportation. The combination of direct dog contact, related structured activities, and community outings support work and volunteer exploration and acquisition.

**ADL's and IADL's.** Task trainers learn how to care for themselves in relation to gaining employment in the community. Our

program has the same expectations of participants that potential employers would have, including good personal hygiene, grooming and appropriate dress. Task training participants learn what is expected, why it is important, how to achieve it, and whether they are meeting these expectations. If appropriate, skill deficits are documented and added as an individual goal. For example, if a participant is not able to manipulate fasteners or tie shoes, we determine the best way to reach that goal. Many times, the skill involves practicing on the dog (e.g., on a vest, collar, backpack), or providing more opportunities in the participant's day to use the skills (e.g., use of a fanny pack with zippers, buttons, and ties, which carries all of their training supplies). Regularly-occurring program situations are conducive to participant home management skill development. For example, task trainers make many of their own training treats, which requires money management, shopping, following recipes, measuring, cooking, and washing dishes. In addition, each participant is responsible for the acquisition and maintenance of their own grooming supplies, towels, leashes, collars, training equipment, and toys. Each puppy has needs that must be maintained within an available budget.

**Educational activities.** The program occurs in a structured learning environment that offers ample opportunities for skill demonstration. Task trainers actively learn skills such as reading, writing, memorization, and maintaining a schedule, needed in a variety of animal-related employment situations while caring for and training the future assistance dogs. Skills are cumulative to facilitate progression of mastery. At the end of the puppies' training, task trainers are responsible for having their pups demonstrate new skills in front of the group. They also are responsible for updating training logs, veterinary visits, puppy weights, and a variety of other paper-handling and writing tasks. Program participants have been observed to independently and spontaneously work on reading skills during lunch as they quiz one another about "commands" and what they mean. Other times they take turns reading local media coverage of the program. Following training in the program, they have the ability to document or explain their experiences in a résumé, an application, or an interview.



**Figure 1. Student trainer, Gabe, bonds with an assistance dog.**  
(Photo by Melissa Winkle, OTR/L.)

*Employment and volunteer exploration and acquisition.* The measurable outcome for task trainers is to obtain either a volunteer or paid employment position in the community. Many of the skills they learn and practice daily with the future assistance dogs can be generalized to a variety of animal-related community settings (e.g., pet supply shops, humane associations, grooming shops). Once the pups have developed proper social skills (no jumping, nibbling, or indoor toileting) and the trainers have gained confidence, the task trainers help to coordinate outings to local senior centers, group homes, and other community program settings. On the way, they teach their puppies how to ride properly in the program van. Upon arrival, responsibilities include approaching and engaging people, performing demonstrations, and explaining the jobs their pups ultimately will fulfill. For many persons with developmental disabilities, this is one instance in which they can demonstrate that they are more knowledgeable than the listener, which fosters self-confidence and a sense of pride that is evident on their faces, in their body language, and in their verbal interactions.

Client factors. Task trainers participate in movement-related activities 75% of the time. Their bodies naturally move against grav-

ity in a variety of planes in an attempt to keep up with the pups. They move equipment and pups daily, which results in improved strength and endurance. Because pups are required to walk by their sides, position in space skills improve. Participants become better aware of doorways and obstacles when they are responsible for a puppy. Equilibrium reactions improve as balance is challenged by the quick movements of the dog, maneuvering of equipment, or walking across changes in terrain on the way to the dog play yard. Participants gain the ability to combine motor and cognitive tasks as they give the dogs commands or treats while walking or interacting with inquisitive passersby. The simple motivation of participating in a meaningful program supports learning and memory functions. Over time, the client learns to inhibit his or her impulsivity in the interest of attention to the puppy's need for safety and proper attention. The structure of the program provides the participant comfort in learning new skills, by tuning into their learning and performance styles, and providing repetition so that they are able to assemble bits of information into a whole working unit. The result is the ability to demonstrate new skill mastery in a variety of community settings, as the participants and pups practice what they have learned together.

### Client and Community Education

The program curriculum includes educating clients and their caregivers about the clients' basic rights in obtaining a volunteer or employment position in the community, and the sometimes subtle signs of exploitation. Meanwhile, barriers to occupational performance are identified, goals are established, and participants are taught to use strategies or adaptations to overcome the barriers and to request reasonable accommodations from their employer (Kornblau & Hinds, 2004). Every barrier overcome is an opportunity to educate clients to advocate for themselves, and every community outing is an opportunity to educate the public about the abilities of persons with different needs and disabilities.

### The Next Step

At this point, the once-rambunctious puppies have matured into young dogs who have mastered basic obedience, retrieval of items from a variety of surfaces, the ability to carry and deliver, and the ability to bond. The task trainers have transformed into confident and skilled people who are ready for competitive employment. The young dogs have accumulated approximately 224 hours of training. The task trainers have accumulated 448 hours of hands-on experience in a variety of activities. Once the young dogs demonstrate appropriate skills, they move off site for advanced training by persons formally educated and experienced in assistance dog training. Later, when the dog demonstrates advanced skills, it is placed permanently with another person with a disability. The program then begins once again with a new group of puppies. Clients are prepared to cope emotionally with separation from the dogs throughout the program, and they are aware that the dogs are being trained for others who need them. We discuss how the dogs change the lives of the individuals they are going to be placed with. The clients will also meet the individuals and have the opportunity to establish relationships. Trainers are given "alone time" with their dog if needed—and we work through transitions in the training and during individual occupational therapy sessions.

### Conclusion

The combination of knowledge and experience equips program participants with skills that may be generalized to pet supply stores, boarding facilities, dog daycare centers, dog bakeries and specialty shops, grooming shops, animal rescues, humane associations, and veterinarian offices as kennel assistants. The trainers getting

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experience in the program have been hired by the program, and many will graduate to work in animal rescue organizations and other shelters. Perhaps the best outcome is seen when our task trainers participate in the philanthropic act of permanently releasing the leash to another person with a disability in our yearly graduation ceremony. ■

*This article is dedicated to the memory of Gabe, who recently passed away in his sleep. Gabe joyfully and selflessly wanted to use his seizure disability to train seizure response and assistance dogs for other people with similar diagnoses.*

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