
DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

SPECIAL INTEREST SECTION QUARTERLY

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

Part 1

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

The use of dogs as a means of client assistance in occupational therapy practice is not new. Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a “goal-directed intervention in which an animal that meets specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT is directed and/or delivered by a health/human service professional with specialized expertise, and within the scope of practice of his/her profession” (Delta Society, 2003). AAT fosters client occupational performance in a variety of home and community settings, and assistance dogs have been trained and permanently placed with persons with disabilities for decades. Guide dogs assist persons with visual disabilities by alerting to obstacles in the environment; hearing dogs respond and alert to a variety of sounds, such as a baby’s cry or a door bell for persons with hearing disabilities; service dogs assist persons with physical disabilities by retrieving dropped items, opening doors and drawers, and doing similar physical tasks (Assistance Dogs International, 2003). However, the job of caring for and training of assistance dogs as a *vocational opportunity* for clients with developmental disabilities has heretofore been unexplored. This article describes the development and initial outcomes of an occupational therapy-based day program involving teaching clients how to care for and train assistance dogs.

The Conception

In 2001, an idea began for creating a community partnership program that integrated an occupational therapy practice with an assistance dog training program in order to benefit clients, dogs in training, and future assistance dog recipients. From an OT perspective, participants in the program would have the opportunity to explore and develop therapeutic, leisure, educational, and work-readiness opportunities by participating in the meaningful activities involved in dog training. From the assis-

tance dog trainer’s perspective, exposing the dogs to, and training them with persons with a variety of physical and psychological issues, provides the dogs with positive problem-solving skills and a level of comfort, both of which are critical for their jobs. Assistance dog trainers can never mimic all the different types of disabilities consistently; but by training and working with persons who actually have disabilities, an individual dog can show us for whom it may be best suited to work.

In May 2004, the Adelante Development Center, an award-winning community service provider for adults with a variety of disabilities, expressed interest in joining and supporting this endeavor. From Adelante’s perspective, this program complemented its mission to assist and support persons with disabilities in discovering and implementing their personal life goals. The program is a valuable service resource in Adelante’s range of supports to independent and interdependent living; and it would offer Adelante’s clients additional choices in therapeutic intervention, day programming, community membership, volunteer participation, and vocational skill development.

The Impetus

Michelle is an active 18-year-old high school graduate with mental retardation. Michelle met Jesse, a service dog with AAT training, in a private occupational therapy practice setting nearly 3 years earlier. Jesse helped with Michelle’s sensory processing, voice modulation, memory, core strength and stability, overall coordination, and vocational exploration goals. Michelle learned many of the vocabulary words that put Jesse into action—retrieving and carrying items, opening doors, and assisting other clients. Jesse would put his head in her lap, roll into her, and even follow her onto a giant suspended bolster swing just to be with her. Michelle explained that working with Jesse “. . . makes my work at therapy fun. . . . He is a very smart dog, and he helps me learn a lot of new things, and he really likes me—he says so all the time—see?” (Jesse placed his

From the Incoming Chairperson

As your new Developmental Disabilities Special Interest Section (DD SIS) Chairperson, I would like to first thank you for your vote of confidence to lead the DD SIS in a direction that not only meets your needs, but also goes in tandem with the American Occupational Therapy Association's long-range plans. Next, I want to introduce the new members of the DD SIS Standing Committee.

I am joined by three outstanding committee members whom I appointed because of their experience in practice, teaching, research, and education. Susan Stallings-Sahler, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, research professor at the Medical College of Georgia, will serve as the *DD SIS Quarterly* Editor. Dr. Stallings-Sahler brings with her years of clinical work with infants, children, and adults with minimal to severe developmental disabilities. She is certified in pediatric and baby neurodevelopmental treatment (NDT) as well as in sensory integration and has taught courses on blending NDT and sensory integration with other approaches. Adel Herge, PhD, OTR/L, teaches at the Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia and will contribute her expertise in wellness programming for adults with developmental disabilities. As Communication Liaison, Dr. Herge will monitor and report on listserv activities, keeping track of potential topics for frequently asked questions and materials for the *Quarterly* and other articles. Jeanne Lewin, MS, OTR/L, from Chicago, is the Education and Research Liaison. Ms. Lewin brings many years of practice, publication, and teaching expertise in early intervention, NDT, sensory integration, and creative problem solving.

Together as your DD SIS Standing Committee, we will do our best to meet your needs and hope that you, in turn, will communicate with us what those needs are as well as actively and aggressively participate through the various media we have available for you—the listserv, e-mail, phone calls, letters, and articles for publication in the *DD SIS Quarterly*, *OT Practice*, and the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*. This way, we can assure ourselves of programming that takes advantage of practice and research opportunities to benefit both practitioners and consumers. We hope to facilitate communication and team building among practitioners and consumers within and outside of developmental disabilities, sensory integration, school systems, and other interest areas, with added emphasis on global practice and relationships. Let us work together to highlight the *occupationality* of various modalities and approaches, including the use of technology, building of *developmental assets*, and continued use of purposeful activities, spanning transitions to school, work, sheltered employment, and independent living. Finally, I hope that purposeful living through meaningful relationships and active living becomes our umbrella theme for the next 3 years. ■

Ricardo C. Carrasco, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA

From the New Editor

I am looking forward with great anticipation to planning and publishing articles in the *Developmental Disabilities Special Interest Section (DD SIS) Quarterly* that not only will be informative and fun to read, but also will expose you to some of the most innovative and exciting programs to come on the scene! Developmental disabilities practice has become so diverse and full of refreshing opportunities for creative occupation-based program development, the field of possibilities seems infinite. This is greatly due to the opportunities created by the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, the Americans With Disabilities Act, and the community-living movement that has swept our country. What profession is more equipped to help persons with developmental disabilities to reach their potential in this new age than occupational therapy?

The *DD SIS Quarterly* also will include (as space is available) various “corners” of skimmable information on legislative initiatives, research initiatives and discoveries, and other quick-access resources to make it even more useful as a tool for promoting best practice in the developmental disabilities arena. Feel free to share these types of resources if you do not wish to write an entire article.

I also welcome submissions from higher educators who are implementing creative fieldwork experiences for their students within community-living and assisted living settings for persons with developmental disabilities and across other environments within the community, such as supported work and recreational initiatives. Truly cutting-edge initiatives are being implemented all over the world, and we want to share yours with our colleagues. Even if your article is just in the “idea stage,” feel free to discuss it with me at ssahler@comcast.net. I will be happy to help you bring it to fruition. Happy reading and writing! ■

Susan Stallings-Sahler, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA

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Editor: Susan Stallings-Sahler
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paw on her knee to redirect her attention to the brush he was holding in his mouth.)

Within the year, Michelle received a puppy that she helped to train for basic obedience. She hoped that she would be able to, “teach him enough to be as smart as Jesse.” Michelle once said that she thought people did not give their dogs a chance to learn harder things, and that is why dogs dig in the yard, bark, and eat up shoes, “because they just needed something to do.”

Upon high school graduation, Michelle envisioned herself living on her own and working in a job meaningful to her, such as working with animals, with children, or in sports. Similarities in a handful of other Adelante clients with developmental disabilities who were participating in a variety of community-based options could be observed. These clients' employment offered insufficient physical movement, was not interesting to the indi-



Figure 1. A student trainer teaches a puppy to turn on/off a light switch. (Photo by: Melissa Winkle, OTR/L)

vidual person, and lacked social interaction and actual community inclusion opportunities. Frequently during community visits, clients were found asleep in their sedentary programs. Although the skill level of the work may have suited them, the level of interest and input to their nervous systems did not. Many program participants demonstrated low tone and low arousal and were significantly overweight. Many times in an effort to self-arouse, they would begin rocking in their chairs or demonstrate “out-of-seat behaviors” and walk around the work setting seeking interaction with peers and staff. This resulted in clients being asked to sit down and their behavior documented.

Many Adelante clients share similarities in goal areas, including activities of daily living (ADL), vocation, leisure, social, and improving performance skills through client factors. The other common thread was that they all liked having a job, but wished they were doing something else that interested them. The *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process* details that engagement in occupation includes both the subjective (emotional or psychological) aspects of performance and the objective (physically observable) aspects of performance (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2002).

Many community program participants with developmental disabilities may be at risk for “occupational deprivation.” They may not have been made aware of the occupational choices available to them, or given the opportunity to explore their own personal interests. As a result, they do not develop competency or mastery of their occupational potential (Renwick, 2004). Furthermore, many persons with developmental disabilities receive education and skills training that are task specific. They do not learn skills that can be generalized to a career path, making it difficult for them to remain employable in a changing environment (Wysocki & Neulicht, 2004).

Program Description

The assistance dog training program is available to persons with a range of disabilities from severe to high functioning.

The attendance duration may be short- or long-term (years) or transitional (6–9 months); it may occur daily (for hours) or weekly, depending on what the client’s goals are and the services he or she is receiving (e.g., individual occupational therapy, adult day programming, community membership, volunteer programs). The overall goal is to provide opportunities for engagement that ultimately result in improved performance in all areas of occupation, including basic activities of daily living (BADL), instrumental activities of daily living (IADL), education, work, play, leisure, and social participation. The premise of the program is that engagement in areas of occupation are influenced by performance skills, patterns, client factors, and activity demands that, in turn, influence engagement in occupation and participation in contexts (AOTA, 2002).

Population Served

Adults with developmental disabilities who attend Adelante participate in the program, which offers two levels of dog training opportunities: *social trainers* and *task trainers*. Clients are screened by the occupational therapist and placed according to individual interests, goals, and initial abilities. Additionally, to maintain safety of both clients and canines, clients are screened to identify contraindications to participation, such as zoophobia, allergies, asthma, immunodeficiency, respiratory disorders, poor skin integrity, and aggressive behaviors.

Social Trainers

Social trainers have moderate to severe physical or cognitive disabilities and attend the program weekly or biweekly for 30 to 60 minutes per visit. They pet, play with, or rest with the puppies or adult dogs in a supervised, semi-structured environment. The occupational therapist may use this time to work with participants on goals using AAT techniques to facilitate improved communication (e.g., eye gaze, vocalization and laughter, gestures), range of motion, strength and endurance, balance, coordination, sensory functions, and leisure skills. Through the Adelante AAT program, many participants now enjoy the opportunities that come with community living after a history of institutionalization earlier in life.

Social trainers have much to offer these future assistance dogs. The puppies in training must develop appropriate social behavior with a variety of people, situations, and equipment. The pups are gently introduced, via their interactions with the trainers, to atypical movements, voices, communication devices, manual and power wheelchairs, walkers, and a wide range of client environmental interaction abilities. The participants benefit from learning how to engage the pups via petting, toys, treats, and vocalizations; and they learn to interpret what the animals want. The overall interaction affords many natural occasions to reach and grasp, practice verbal and non-verbal social interaction skills, as well as to observe cause and effect. Volunteer involvement in meaningful, goal-oriented activities that result in positive behavior and functional changes are the major outcomes for these participants, rather than vocational expectations. ■

*(To be continued March 2006,
when task trainers will be addressed.)*

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