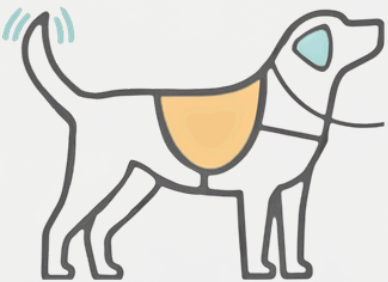


WELLNESS WAGS ASSISTANCE DOGS

# AUTISM SERVICE DOG PROGRAM GUIDE

JANUARY 2026



WELLNESS  
**WAGS**  
ASSISTANCE DOGS

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## About Wellness Wags

Wellness Wags Assistance Dogs is a Nova Scotia–based nonprofit organization supporting individuals and communities through the life-changing partnership of professionally trained service dogs. We are one of only two organizations in Canada serving Nova Scotia, and the only one based in Nova Scotia, providing fully trained Autism Service Dogs to local applicants. Our programs fill a critical service gap, ensuring that Nova Scotians have access to highly trained assistance dogs that enhance safety, independence, well-being, and inclusion for people with disabilities and vulnerable populations.



Our mission is dedicated to fostering independence, cultivating confidence, and enhancing overall well-being through the transformative companionship and essential assistance of highly trained service dogs. We enable individuals to regain autonomy, strengthen their sense of purpose, reintegrate themselves into society, and elevate their quality of life. We achieve this by providing comprehensive client education and prioritizing fear-free, positive reinforcement training methods, ensuring a relationship that benefits both ends of the leash.

We carefully plan breeding and whelping to give each puppy the best start, focusing on health, temperament, and early socialization for future job success. Early socialization is critical for rearing confident puppies, so from birth, they experience gentle handling and positive exposure to everyday real-world sights, sounds, and experiences to prepare them adequately for their future roles. We proudly operate with a diverse volunteer base who are passionate about raising and supporting our future assistance dogs. Puppy raisers play a vital role for each puppy between 8 weeks old for approximately 18 months, providing basic obedience, loving homes and real-world exposure to prepare the puppy for its future. The skill level and training of the puppies advances throughout puppyhood, until the dogs are ready to begin formal training around 18 months with dogs typically graduating around 18–24 months of age, fully ready to transform lives.

Every dog that graduates from our program has been raised using positive reinforcement and fear-free training methods, with extensive socialization and exposure to a wide variety of real-world settings, ensuring they are fully prepared for their important roles. Graduates also complete a series of comprehensive veterinary procedures to ensure they are healthy, sound and cleared for service work, meeting all veterinary requirements for service dogs set out by the province of Nova Scotia. This includes orthopedic X-rays of the hips and elbows, spay or neuter surgery, a cardiac evaluation, and a thorough "head-to-toe" veterinary wellness exam confirming each dog is up to date on vaccinations and parasite prevention. Dogs who are found unsuitable for graduation due to medical or behavioural reasons are adopted into carefully selected pet homes, where they live out their lives as cherished and deeply loved companions.

## About Wellness Wags

### Wellness Wags currently offers three distinct programs:

#### Autism Service Dogs:

These dogs provide support to families in Nova Scotia with a child aged 3-10 on the autism spectrum. These purpose-bred and expertly trained dogs perform key tasks to assist with safety, routines, sleep, and outings, while delivering life-changing benefits that support both the child and the entire family.

#### Mobility Service Dogs:

Mobility service dogs support individuals with physical disabilities by performing practical tasks that restore independence, such as retrieving dropped or named items, opening/closing doors and cabinets, carrying objects, operating alert systems, and assisting with clothing removal like socks or sleeves. These dogs also bark to summon help during emergencies. While not formal tasks, recipients gain substantial emotional benefits including increased motivation, happiness, reduced stress, and less loneliness. These service dogs can lighten the load on caregivers, cutting paid caregiving hours by about 2 hours per week<sup>1</sup> and reducing reliance on family assistance<sup>2</sup>. Applicants for this program often desire greater independence from family and caregivers. The service dog bridges this gap by reliably handling essential tasks, reassuring loved ones while enabling the user's newfound self-reliance. Our program serves as that vital catalyst for families seeking balance between support and autonomy.

#### Facility Dogs:

Wellness Wags Facility Dogs are carefully matched and trained to work alongside professionals in settings like courthouses, hospitals, advocacy centres, and other qualifying organizations in Nova Scotia. Distinct from volunteer therapy dogs, Facility dogs are integrated into an organization to support in a full time, life-long capacity. Like service dogs, facility dogs receive task-specific training for their work environment, providing targeted support that fosters engagement, promotes participation in challenging situations, minimizes distress, reduces stress, improves mood, and boosts motivation and focus<sup>3-5</sup>. They offer consistent, integrated assistance that enhances well-being and complements organizational programs. Our goal is to ensure each placement allows the dog to thrive in its role, supports the well-being of staff and the community, and enhances the effectiveness of the programs and services they assist.



## Autism Service Dog Program

Our Autism Service Dogs Program provides crucial support to families in Nova Scotia raising children ages 3-10 on the autism spectrum; affecting 1 in 44 children and youth (2.25%)<sup>6</sup>. These purpose-bred and expertly trained dogs perform key tasks to assist with safety, routines, and outings, while delivering life-changing benefits that support both the child and the entire family through our thoughtful matching process.

These dogs are trained to support each child's individual needs, by providing consistent support at home, school, in public spaces, as well as when traveling. Beyond safety and practical assistance, Autism Service Dogs foster companionship, increase self-esteem, and improve communication skills, allowing children to thrive in their environments with greater enjoyment and confidence. An Autism Service Dog's working career is typically 8-10 years, supporting each child and family long term with stability through the majority of their childhood years. When a service dog is integrated into daily life, they can be truly transformative, not only enhancing a child's physical and emotional well-being, but also supporting the family as a whole.



### How to Receive an Autism Service Dog:

1. Program Guide Book ← **YOU ARE HERE!**
2. Expression of Interest (EOI)
3. Formal application
4. Consultation
5. Acceptance & Matching
6. Team Training

More details on the Application Process on page 12

### Core Tasks:

- **Child Safety:** The dog's vest handle enables parents to maintain close control, significantly reducing elopement risks across all environments.
- **Deep Pressure Therapy:** The dog provides calming sensory input through body weight (chin rests, leaning, or lying across) to reduce anxiety for sensory-seeking children.
- **Sleep Routine Independence:** The dog facilitates independent sleeping in the child's own bed/room, often eliminating parental presence, through overnight companionship and reassuring physical presence, reducing night wakings and improving sleep quality.
- **Community Access:** The dog transforms overwhelming public spaces into manageable family experiences, enabling full participation in community life by serving as a portable, consistent calming tool helping children cope with sensory triggers that previously led to meltdowns.
- **Behaviour Interruption:** The dog gently nudges to interrupt or redirect distress or self-harm behaviours, facilitating de-escalation.

# Autism Service Dog Program

### Benefits Beyond Core Tasks:

- **Family-wide sleep gains:** Independent child rest eliminates need for parental sleep presence.
- **Fewer, shorter meltdowns:** Emotional regulation support through consistent canine companionship.
- **Combats isolation:** Loyal companion reduces loneliness while improving community access—less need to stay home or avoid public spaces.
- **Boosted verbal skills:** Daily dog interactions motivate richer vocabulary and verbal cues, positively reinforced by dog's responses.
- **Social bridges and self-esteem:** Turns public judgement into warm connections—kids feel seen, included, celebrated.
- **Empathy, pride, responsibility:** Protecting, caring for, and nurturing their loyal companion builds relationship skills and self-esteem.
- **Everyday motivation:** Responsibility for dog provides engaging prompts ("Grab Fido's handle to keep your dog safe!" or "Fido's ready for his walk, we need to put our shoes on to make sure you take good care of him!").
- **Mood uplift:** Unconditional bond provides consistent emotional support.
- **Steady, portable sensory tool:** Reliable presence amid unpredictable life changes prevents trigger stacking and enables on-the-go de-escalation, allowing families to complete errands without premature exits.
- **Smoother community access:** Positive perceptions facilitate easier public interactions.



# Autism Service Dog Program

### Evidence of Impact: How Autism Service Dogs Make a Difference

The impact of Autism Service Dogs has been well-documented in peer-reviewed research on animal-assisted interventions for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Studies show these dogs improve sleep quality, reduce stress hormones like cortisol, decrease challenges, and lower parent anxiety, enhancing overall child development and family well-being.

The statistics below summarize key outcomes from peer-reviewed studies, demonstrating tangible benefits in sleep, behaviour, stress, and family dynamics.

- Service dog families showed significantly better sleep initiation and duration, significantly less sleep anxiety and co-sleeping, and overall better child sleep habits after service dog placement<sup>7</sup>.
- Children showed significant ASD symptom improvements by 6 months with a service dog<sup>8</sup>.
- Parents' anxiety decreased alongside child symptom improvements with an Autism Service Dog<sup>8</sup>.
- Parents had an 82% reduction in their morning cortisol surge (stress hormone rise)- from 58% increase without the dog to just 10% with the dog present<sup>9</sup>.
- Service dogs boosted social skills and interactions, acting as a "social catalyst" for better communication and peer/public engagement<sup>7</sup>.



These findings illustrate that Autism Service Dogs actively support emotional regulation, engagement, and long-term outcomes, beyond simple companionship.

# How our Autism Service Dogs are Trained

At Wellness Wags, we have our own breeding program for our service dogs. We collaborate with other service dog organizations around the globe, to expand and strengthen our genetic lines, only using proven service dog lines with comprehensive breed-specific health clearances including full genetic panels. This ensures our dogs are not only healthy and confident but also possess the friendly, kind demeanor essential for their work. Each dog is carefully selected for an innate ability to love and engage with many people without becoming stressed or overwhelmed. Our dogs thrive in busy environments, enjoy interacting with a variety of individuals, and approach their work with joy, patience, and enthusiasm, making them ideal partners for the specialized support they provide. Our accredited trainers ensure that every Wellness Wags dog is trained to the same international standards that each of our service dogs is trained to. Not every dog is suitable for this line of work, and it is pivotal to ensure that our dogs are exceeding expectations throughout their working career.

Our dogs begin their journey as puppies raised by volunteer foster families. These families, with our guidance and support, provide the dogs with foundational skills, socialization in real-world settings, and early experiences that prepare them for a future career as an assistance dog. We use evidence-based, reward-driven training techniques that create a relationship of trust, confidence, and joy between each dog and their handler.

When the dogs return from their volunteer puppy raisers to Wellness Wags for advanced training, we assess their temperament, strengths, and interests to determine their ideal track for training. In the Autism Service Dog Track, dogs undergo specialized training that includes:

- **Safety and guidance skills:** Bolting prevention, alerting caregivers to potential hazards, and guiding children safely through indoor and outdoor environments.
- **Emotional regulation:** Providing deep pressure therapy, nudging, or body contact to help children manage anxiety, meltdowns, and sensory overload.
- **Daily living support:** Retrieving items, reminding or prompting routines (such as medication, dressing, or hygiene tasks), and assisting with transitions between activities.
- **Social facilitation:** Encouraging interaction with peers, teachers, and family members, and supporting the development of social and communication skills.
- **Adaptability in public and therapeutic settings:** Exposure to schools, therapy environments, community outings, and public spaces to ensure composure, confidence, and focus in varied and sometimes unpredictable situations.
- **Tailored cues and behaviours:** Learning individualized cues specific to each child's needs, including interrupting repetitive behaviours, prompting safe engagement, or offering calming signals at key moments.



These dogs are carefully matched to each child and trained to integrate seamlessly into daily routines. We prioritize placements that will allow our dogs to thrive and make the greatest impact.

## Who Can Apply?

Families with children ages 3–10 diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) living in Nova Scotia who demonstrate a need for safety, emotional regulation, and daily living support may be eligible.

Please review the following key sections to see if our Autism Service Dog program is the right fit for your family:

- Eligibility Criteria
- Handler and Care Requirements
- Ongoing Responsibilities and Expectations



### Eligibility Criteria:

- Child must have a medical diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder
- Child must be aged 3-10 years old at time of first application
- A parent or guardian must be able to independently direct and handle an Autism Service Dog
- Family must commit to actively improving their quality of life and pursuing independence with an Autism Service Dog
- Family must be financially able to care for the dog (vet bills, food, treats, wellness, grooming, etc.).
- Dog must reside in a smoke-free home that is deemed to be a safe environment for the dog by Wellness Wags Assistance Dogs
- Must be residing in Nova Scotia
- Have not been convicted of cruelty, abuse, or neglect of animals or humans, crimes against humanity, or violence against animals or humans

## Who Can Apply?

### Handler and Care Requirements

**Primary Handler:** One family member, often the parent or guardian, must serve as the primary handler for their child's Autism Service Dog and attend Team Training. This should be whichever parent spends the most time with the child, and intends to be out and about in the community more often with the child. Both parents are welcome to come. However, both parents being able to get the time off work is often a challenge. Both parents will be trained on how to handle the dog, but the one who attended team training is considered the primary handler.

**Additional Family Handlers:** After 3 months of successful placement after team training, additional family handlers can be trained as back up handlers (Step parents, grandparents, EAs, or any other person who is responsible for caring for the child on a temporary basis). Utilizing the dog in as many activities with your child as possible will ensure consistency of new routines with the service dog, as well as maximize the dog's benefit to the child.

**Parent and Sibling Interactions:** To ensure the bond is given a platform to flourish, other people in the home need to be able to understand that the service dog is intended to support one child, and interactions will need to be limited and managed, to prevent the dog from creating stronger bonds with the other children or family members. Especially with children with limited vocabulary, the bond may need some nurturing to form. This is most important in the first 6 months and we will walk you through how to do this during team training.

#### **Ownership and Responsibilities:**

The Autism service dog must be housed in a smoke-free, safe home environment (including your vehicle). Families must be willing to meet all the dog's emotional, physical, and medical needs. Wellness Wags maintains ownership of all autism service dogs from placement through to retirement (typically 8-10 years). Wellness Wags provides all of our assistance dogs at no mandatory upfront cost to qualified recipients. Applicants must be aware that all recipients of a service dog are responsible for all aspects of care for the dog from placement throughout the entire career of the dog until the date of retirement (and beyond if they opt to adopt the dog as a pet in retirement). All aspects of care include but are not limited to: all required supplies, food, treats, routine or emergency veterinary expenses, grooming, and any other services needed to maintain the dog's well-being. These costs are mandatory for ALL recipients. In Step 3 Formal Application, applicants must be able to generously demonstrate they have the ability to provide adequate care and support for the dog consistently for the next 8-10 years, or the dog's entire career.

**Financial Contributions:** Wellness Wags encourages all recipients of a service dog to make a recommended financial contribution, in the form of a donation, towards the \$40,000 value of the service dog and placement to sustain our training programs and lifetime support. The application process will ask you about a sliding scale financial contribution, however, they are not mandatory and do not impact eligibility.

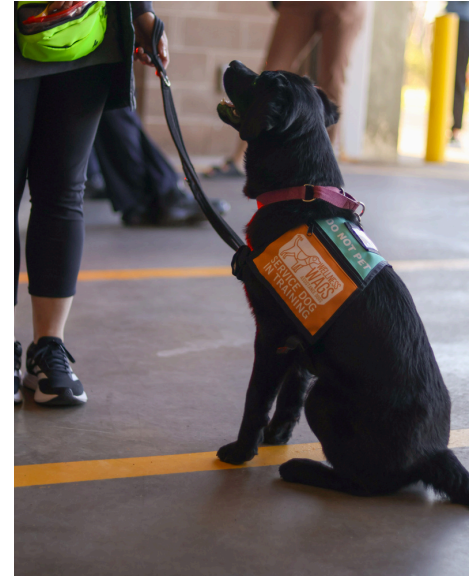
## Ongoing Responsibilities & Expectations

Once an Autism Service Dog is placed, Wellness Wags remains actively involved to support the family throughout the Service Dog's entire working career, approximately 8-10 years. Applicants should understand they are entering into a long-term partnership with Wellness Wags and agree to the following ongoing responsibilities to ensure the success, welfare, and sustainability of the placement:

- Follow all of Wellness Wag's requirements to maintain a safe environment for the dog at all times, including at in the home environment, in public settings, and while outdoors, while in a vehicle and in the primary handlers home environment.
- Maintain all training, veterinary care, grooming care, and exercise needs for the Autism Service Dog for its entire working career. Ensure the dog's physical and emotional well-being is always prioritized.
- Ensure the dog's workload remains appropriate and sustainable, including adequate rest, enrichment, and downtime.
- Collaborate with Wellness Wags trainers and staff through regular follow-up, check-ins, home visits and problem-solving support as needed.
- Submit required biannual reports detailing the dog's health, behaviour, and workload, and participate in scheduled check-in visits.
- Obtain Wellness Wags approval before sending the dog to school with your child. This is a process that takes time to initiate, and must be a collaboration between the parents, school, school board, and EAs/Support Staff. A school placement will be scheduled to provide the child's support staff on handler training, and do an assembly for the school body. Wellness Wags Autism Service dogs cannot go to school without prior consent from Wellness Wags.
- Notify Wellness Wags promptly of any unforeseen changes that may impact the dog's placement, including handler transitions, family unit changes, or concerns related to the dog's welfare or performance.

**Compliance and Oversight:** Wellness Wags verifies criminal background checks and 2 character references for the family. No history/convictions of cruelty, neglect, or violence against animals/humans allowed.

Families must demonstrate a stable home environment and have the capacity to support the dog's care and tasks.



Consistent with service dog industry standards, Wellness Wags maintains ownership of all service and Autism Service Dogs throughout their careers to guarantee consistent oversight and adherence to impact behavioural, health, and ethical standards. Although exceptionally rare, this authority safeguards our dogs and the significant investment of time, training, and resources, allowing us to intervene or conclude any placement when necessary. Given the hundreds of families awaiting placement, we responsibly reassign dogs to partners who can utilize the full transformative 8–10 year impact of the dog.

# Autism Service Dog Program Guide

## The Application Process

The journey to receiving a Wellness Wags Autism Service Dog involves several steps to ensure a successful placement for both the child and the family:

### Step 1: Learn About the Program

This guide is the first step in understanding how a Wellness Wags Autism Service Dog works and whether our program aligns with your child's needs and family circumstances. Please read this guide thoroughly before moving on to Step 2.

### Step 2: Expression of Interest (EOI)

When the Application process is open, families have the opportunity to express interest in receiving an Autism Service Dog through the EOI form on our website. The Expression of Interest helps us learn more about your child, their needs, your goals, and your family, and whether a Wellness Wags Autism Service Dog may be the right fit, before inviting you to complete a full application in Step 3. Please take your time answering the questions with as much detail as possible. We use this information to better understand your situation and how an Autism Service Dog could make a meaningful difference.

Due to an overwhelming interest in our programs, please note that not all applicants will be invited to fill out a formal application in Step 3. Only a small number selected candidates who we think that we can serve well with the dogs we currently have in the program will be invited to fill out a formal application. As we work our way through the applicants, each applicant will either receive a letter of regret, or an invitation to complete Step 3 -Formal Application.

There is no set timeline for this step. Please be patient with our team. If you have not heard back, please feel free to check in for an update 60 days after the EOI process has closed by emailing us at [info@wellnesswags.ca](mailto:info@wellnesswags.ca).

When filling out the EOI you will be prompted to provide some basic information about your child, your family, attest understanding the program requirements as outlined in this guide, and successfully answer the pre-eligibility questions. After that, you will be able to answer the main expression of interest question.

Continued on the next page →

## Expression of Interest

To ensure you take the appropriate time to craft your response, we encourage you to carefully prepare and edit your written response to this question in a separate document rather than in the question field on this form. When you are ready to submit your application, paste in your written response when you complete the rest of the information gathering.

The main body of the **Expression of Interest** is the following:

“To help us determine if an Autism Service Dog could be the right fit for your child, please prepare a detailed, honest, written Expression of Interest for the Autism Service Dog Program in the form of a letter, narrative, or proposal. Your response should be thoughtful and detailed — not brief, point form, or a rough draft (2000-5000 characters or 1-2 pages).

Please include the following:

- Your Family's Story: Introduce us to you, your child, and your family unit including any current pets.
- Your lifestyle: your home, and the environment (urban, rural, suburban, etc.), What life looks like for you, your routines, how & where you currently spend your time.
- Why does your child require an Autism Service Dog? How could an Autism Service Dog benefit them? What changes are you hoping to see with the addition of a service dog? What you hope to be able to do after the placement of an Autism Service Dog?
- Tell us about your prior dog experience, and your child's experiences with dogs.

Include any additional information about your child, family, and lifestyle that you believe would be important to know when considering matching an Autism Service Dog to your family.

Although not required, at the end of the form, you will be asked if you would like to submit any photos or a video in support of your EOI. Videos can be informal point-and-shoot clips. No professional editing is required. There's no set format, but footage highlighting your child, your family, your home or your lifestyle adds personality to help your application stand out, and helps us visualize the possibilities of a placement with your family.

Limit to 5 photos and 1 video (no longer than 5 minutes).

Apply for open EOIs or  
subscribe to be notified  
when programs open:  
[wellnesswags.ca/apply](https://wellnesswags.ca/apply)



Continued on the next page →

# Autism Service Dog Program Guide

## The Application Process

### Step 3: Formal Application

If you are not selected to proceed after submitting an Expression of Interest, you will receive a letter of regret. If the Expression of Interest indicates a potential fit, selected applicants will then be invited via email to complete Step 3 - Formal Application.

As part of this application, applicants must provide documentation to verify eligibility and readiness. This includes:

- An official diagnosis for your child's ASD from a licensed healthcare professional.
- Contact information for a doctor who supports the placement of a service dog and who can provide a prescription, and attest to the ways in which a service dog could help mitigate the disability
- Contact information for 2 people to provide a character reference
- Contact information for a veterinarian reference (if you have owned pets before)

Wellness Wags will review the application and determine if your submission advances to the next step - consultation.

### Step 4: Consultation

If Wellness Wags determines your application demonstrates strong need and likelihood of success, and we may have a dog match for you, we will schedule a home visit. This includes meeting your family, getting to know more specific details about your child, their needs, and how to find the best match for them, as well as complete a home inspection to confirm that the dwelling is safe, suitable, and supportive of the dog's well-being.

During this stage, Wellness Wags will also meet with the primary handler to assess baseline dog-handling skills. No prior experience is required, but understanding the handler's starting point helps ensure an appropriate dog match.



Continued on the next page →

# Autism Service Dog Program Guide

## The Application Process

### Step 5: Approval & Matching

After a successful consultation and home inspection, your application goes to our Acceptance and Matching Committee for review to determine if we have a suitable dog match for you. Unfortunately, an applicant may be a wonderful fit for an Autism Service Dog, but potentially not a fit for an Autism Service Dog that we are currently looking for placement for.

At this stage, you will receive one of three outcomes:

- **Letter of Regret:** Criteria for placement not met.
- **Reserve Letter (Pre-Approved EOI):** You met all criteria, but no current dog match available. We've added you to our pre-approved reserve list. Simply notify us when the next EOI opens, no full re-application is needed. Pre-approved applicants remain in consideration for up to three cycles to secure optimal match.
- **Approval Letter:** Confirmed intent to match a dog during this class of dogs, placed on the waitlist and will be contacted with an invitation to team training to begin the placement.

Most dogs will progress through advanced training and **placement with an applicant within the same calendar year as the application**, however, all applicants should approach the process with flexibility, understanding the unpredictable nature of working with sentient animals. The Acceptance and Matching Committee carefully aligns each dog with the handler's skills, home environment, needs, and goals, maximizing impact and success by prioritizing perfect matches over speed.

### Step 6: Team Training

The primary handler will be invited to complete mandatory team training, where handler and Autism Service Dog first learn to work together without the child. The handler must pass competency-based training—meeting specific criteria and goals rather than fixed hours (approx. 50 hours expected). This blended program includes on-demand modules, class-style lessons, in-person classes, 1:1 sessions, and practical hands-on training with our trainers during real-world practice in public places, and the handler's home to establish foundational rules and maintenance standards.

Team Training sessions may be scheduled any time or day of the week—including weekdays, evenings, and weekends—depending on class sizes, team schedules, and workload. Applicants should anticipate needing time off work to attend and prioritize placement with a service or facility dog. Declining a scheduled Team Training invitation counts as declining the proposed dog match, returning you to the waitlist for the next match. Up to two declines are permitted; a third terminates pre-approval, requiring reapplication from the Expression of Interest (EOI) process.

### On-Going Support

Wellness Wags stays connected with each family throughout the working life of their Autism Service Dog, typically 8–10 years. We maintain ownership of the dog for its career, ensuring it continues to receive the support and oversight needed to perform its role effectively. We provide ongoing guidance, refresher training, and problem-solving for any challenges that may arise. Families are required to submit annual reports and participate in periodic check-ins to ensure the dog is working to its full capacity and meeting the child's needs. Our priority is the well-being of both the Autism Service Dog and the child, ensuring a safe, supportive, and meaningful partnership that benefits the whole family.

At Wellness Wags, we believe a highly trained Autism Service Dog transforms lives for families with children on the autism spectrum. These dogs provide consistent calm, trust, and comfort during life's toughest moments—reducing harm, de-escalating stress, and supporting families with safety, sleep, and emotional regulation.

By partnering with families like yours, our Autism Service Dogs deliver connection, reassurance, and emotional support when other efforts fall short. They foster engagement, resilience, and confidence, empowering families to navigate life more effectively with a furry support system.

**We look forward to exploring how a Wellness Wags Autism Service Dog could become a cherished family member!**



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## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. What is the difference between an Autism Service Dog and a Therapy Dog?

An Autism Service Dog is a highly trained assistance dog that lives and works full-time with a child and their family to mitigate the child's disability by providing support, safety, and emotional regulation in everyday life. The Autism Service Dog is considered a piece of medical equipment for your child, and has public access into nearly all public places you may frequent, allowing the dog to be used as a consistent tool for supporting the child in all environments. Autism Service Dogs often attend school, therapy, medical appointments, errands and outings with their child and family. Therapy dogs, while valuable, are not task-trained or placed with one family full-time. They usually visit multiple locations occasionally and do not provide consistent, specialized support for a specific child.

### 2. How much does it cost to receive an Autism Service Dog?

All families are required to cover all ongoing expenses to care for the Autism Service Dog for its entire career (8-10 years), including but not limited to supplies, food, grooming, and routine and emergency vet care. Wellness Wags provides Autism Service Dogs at no mandatory upfront cost to families approved through our application process; however, we encourage families to contribute toward the \$40,000 value of the Autism Service Dog through personal donations or fundraising efforts. Wellness Wags supports families in fundraising efforts with dedicated fundraising pages that accept digital payments and track progress toward your fundraising goal. We encourage you to set a fundraising goal that feels attainable and justified by the impact the service dog will provide.

### 3. Will our family receive training?

Yes, comprehensive training is provided for all parents and guardians, with a focus on having one primary handler fully trained through the team training process. The primary handler must complete mandatory "team training" (handler and dog learning to work as a team), which is competency-based—meeting specific criteria and goals together rather than a set number of hours, though approximately 50 hours can be expected. This blended training includes on-demand modules, class-style lessons, in-person classes, 1:1 sessions, and real-world practice with the dog in public places, and in your home to establish foundational rules and maintenance standards. This training ensures consistent dog responses across environments, builds handler confidence, and meets program standards for public access. Once the handler is confidently working with the service dog, Wellness Wags will work with the families to integrate the child into the sessions, and will assist in setting your family up for success in facilitating the bond between the Autism Service Dog and your child. Post-placement support continues through training refreshers, ongoing guidance, follow up visits, additional handler training for extended family and school support staff placements for the entire 8-10 year career of the Autism Service Dog.

### 4. Can the Autism Service Dog accompany my child to school or public spaces?

Yes. Our Autism Service Dogs are trained to work in a variety of environments, including home, school, therapy sessions, and public spaces. They remain calm, focused, and responsive to the child's needs. Access to public spaces like malls, restaurants, and medical facilities is legally protected, widely accepted, and requires no preapproval for each outing. For school integration (typically after ~6 months of successful placement), families interested in sending the dog to school with the child should collaborate with Wellness Wags, the school, school board, and support staff who will be handling the dog in a school setting. When travelling, discuss plans for integrating service dog in your plans with Wellness Wags as early as possible, as travel mode and destination can significantly affect booking processes to approve travel with a service dog, which may take time.

# Frequently Asked Questions

### 5. How long does the process take, and when will we get a dog?

Our programs are very popular, and we expect to get hundreds of applications for each cohort of dogs (between 5-15 dogs). When application cycles are open for EOIs, this means we are planning for the matches for the dogs in our graduating class of each given year (e.g., Class of 2026). Most dogs will progress through advanced training and placement with an applicant within 6 - 12 months of the EOI/ Application. While same-year placement is our goal, timelines are approximate and may not align perfectly with calendar years. Our 6-step application process prioritizes finding the optimal match for each of our unique dogs over anything else. Most dogs graduate around age 2, with planning for their applicants and matches beginning around 1 year old.

### 6. Why is the process so unpredictable? What if we encounter challenges after placement?

Most dogs graduate around age 2, with planning for their applicants and matches beginning the year before that, around 1 year old. Just like a Grade 12 high school student starting the year has no idea if they'll graduate, get into university, thrive in their major, or land their first "adult job," our dogs go through a similar (condensed) decision-making track during that one-year period between your application and their placement readiness. Asking for an exact timeline is like asking the Grade 12 student what their first big job will be—there are a lot of unknowns and a lot can change! During the last 6-12 months of our dogs' training, we determine if they'll qualify for the Autism, Mobility, or Autism Service Dog track and which "major" best suits their skills. They complete advanced training, developing specific niche abilities for their future placement. After "theory" learning, they apply skills in real scenarios to prove readiness as Autism Service Dogs and identify key criteria about the environment where they'll best thrive long-term. On top of that, variables like illness, injury, behavioural growth, or disqualification can disrupt intended matches. As soon as we confirm a dog match for a specific placement, we communicate transparently with accepted applicants about matches and timelines—flexibility is required for optimal outcomes. All applicants should approach the process with flexibility, understanding the unpredictable nature of service dog placement with sentient beings. Our ultimate goal is to ensure the best fit for the dog and the individual—we would ultimately prefer you wait longer for the perfect match rather than experiencing the disappointment of not having it work out with a match that was not quite right for the role.

### 7. How do you select which dog goes to which person/organization? Can I pick our dog?

Wellness Wags will determine eligibility for the program based on each of our unique and individual class of dogs in the program in that given year. Each Wellness Wags dog has distinct personality, strengths, skills, training, and behavioural needs that each require a specific environment to thrive. Some dogs would be capable of doing any work, anywhere; others may thrive in a very specific setting. Our 6-step application process allows us to narrow down the pool of applicants to find the best placements to set each current dog and recipient up for success. Statistically speaking, most applicants will not be matched the first time they apply, but we do encourage applications in future years as notably, the pool of dogs and their personalities changes year to year, and therefore so does what we are looking for in our applicants. We carefully match each dog to an individual equipped to provide them the ideal setting and support to thrive, ensuring the best possible outcome for both the dog and the program. Recipients are matched with the dog based on the quality of match, not their preference of the dogs breed, sex, or colour. If you have had a negative experience with a certain type of dog in the past that would impact your ability to bond with and trust a new dog, please include that information on your EOI.