

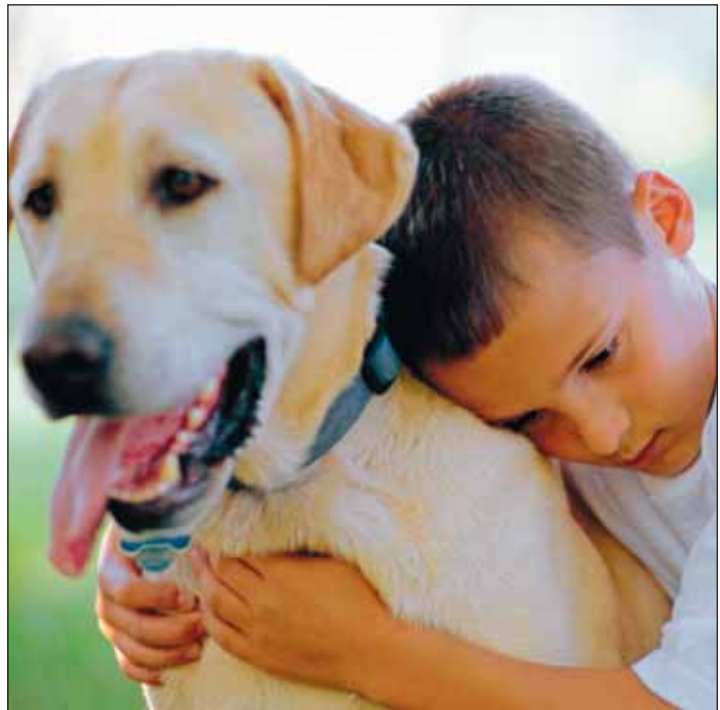
By Steven Shannon

# The Benefits of an Assistance Dog for Families of Children with Autism

This project on the benefits of an assistance dog for families of children with autism was entered into the Social and Behavioural Section of the BT Young Scientist Competition 2008 and it was 'Highly Commended'. I am a first year student in Sligo Grammar School and I live with my parents and two younger brothers David and Matthew. My father, Gerard, serves as a Garda in Grange, Co. Sligo. My brother Matthew has autism and he has just received an assistance dog called Mitzy. Matthew was born in Cyprus while my father was serving as a member of the Irish Civilian Police with the UN in 1997-1998.

### **Background to the study:**

The Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind (IGDB) Assistance Dog Programme for families of children with Autism is a relatively new concept developed in the last few years in Ireland. This breakthrough intervention is based on the principle of providing a fully trained dog to the parents and the autistic child and providing them with the training and support to ensure that the dog works to the maximum of his abilities. The Assistance Dog program started seven years ago in Canada as a way of using dogs that had been trained but were not skilled enough to work with blind people. It began as a pilot scheme in Ireland in 2005 and there are currently 35 families on the programme.



The dog's training focuses on protecting the child it is paired with. This involves keeping the child from running away, into traffic and to prevent self-inflicted injuries. Each dog wears a specially designed harness which consists of a jacket, a lead for the parent to hold, a belt which is attached around the child's waist, which connects them to the dog and a handle for the child to hold. The assistance dog responds to commands by the parent holding the lead. The dog responds to any dangers. If the child bolts, the dog controls the child by sitting, resulting in a change of behaviour. The assistance dog (AD) is like a helper who is always with the child to keep him safe and comfort him.

These dogs are an amazing aid for these children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). A well trained dog that a child will bond

with aids in socialisation and allows normal interaction in society. A working team of a child with Autism and a dog is a wonderful sight. They seem like just any child with a pet but on close examination it is clear the dog is on duty. The socialisation that a dog brings to a child's life becomes part of therapy along with the freedom to simply be able to play outside or go shopping.

Having an autistic child in the family does not affect the child only but it also affects the whole family. My brother has no comprehension of safety and has run from us into the sea, in front of cars and has got lost in the Liffey Valley Shopping Centre last Christmas. Going out in public with him had become too dangerous and nerve-racking. Children with Autism can be prone to tantrums, fits and bolting away. They hate crowds and are not aware of danger. Our family applied for an Assistance Dog from the Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind and following a thorough assessment and intensive training, Mitzy was paired with my brother on the 16th of November 2007. This was my inspiration for researching the evidence on Assistance Dogs for families of children with Autism.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them. Children with Autism have difficulties with everyday social interaction. Their ability to develop friendships is generally limited as is their capacity to understand people's emotional expression.

The Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind (IGDB) Assistance Dog Programme, which is a first for Europe, aims to:

- provide quality of life improvements,
- improve independence and
- safety for the Autistic child and family.



Gerard Shannon, IPA Member with his son Matthew and assistant dog, Mitzy in Sligo City.

The purpose of placing a trained Assistance Dog (AD) is to reduce the impact on the day to day lives of individuals affected by autism (IGDB, 2007).

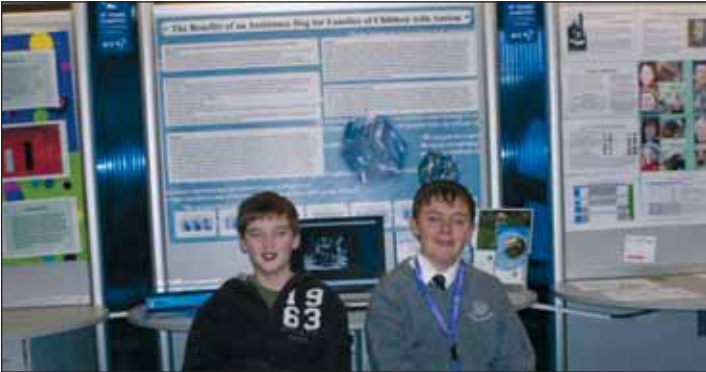
The aim of the study was to demonstrate significant benefits of an assistance dog for families of children with Autism. The objectives were:

1. To provide evidence of improvement in social interaction, behaviour, physical ability and communication skills.
2. To demonstrate the effects of the assistance dog on normal life situations for the family.
3. To provide evidence of the human-animal bond between the autistic individual and the assistance dog. Children with autism form close relationships with the assistance dog and are able to relate to animals in ways that they are unable to with humans.
4. To illustrate changes in therapy goals achieved since the introduction of the assistance dog over the last year.

### **Methods:**

This case study looked at a small number of families with an assistance dog in depth to help understand the impact of the dog on the autistic child and family on normal life situations, in social interaction, behaviour, and physical ability and communication skills. A questionnaire was sent to families known to the Autism Services with an assistance dog for at least a year living in the northwest. Families who are on the waiting list for the IGDB assistance dog programme were sent a questionnaire for comparison.

Autism Therapy staff (HSE West) completed a questionnaire on the level of therapy goals achieved since the assistance dog was placed with the child over the last year. Eight families replied from the



David Shannon, with his brother Steven at BT Young Scientist Exhibition in Dublin.

northwest region. This sample population was matched on age, gender, education, ability and diagnosis. Through detailed surveys, observations of my brother and his assistance dog and extensive reading I set out to explore the science behind the unique human-animal bond that develops between autistic children and their assistance dog. This will help lead towards formulating a hypothesis which can be tested on a larger sample in the future. This is the first time, to my knowledge, to look at the Irish context from the perspective of the families and from the perspective of HSE staff working with the individuals.

#### **Results:**

It is apparent that the data collected has identified the benefits of an assistance dog for families of children with Autism. The greatest impact of the Assistance dog is on the child's level of independence in the community and in safety awareness and tendency to run away or bolt. Improvements were noticeable in physical stamina and ability to exercise and play with the dog. Communication skills and improvements in behaviour were evident also. The responses from the therapists clearly displayed improvements in social skills, communication, motor tasks, ability to follow instruction and level of arousal. The effect of having an autistic child in the family was clearly demonstrated between those awaiting an assistance dog and those who have one placed for the last year particularly on the level of participation in normal life situations. The data collected, indicated that all subjects display affection towards their assistance dog that they rarely, if ever, display toward human companions. The results suggest that children with autism may be able to demonstrate behaviours towards pets that they do not display to people, even family members, and which are similar to those associated with close relationships.

#### **Conclusions and future directions:**

Support was found for the conclusion that Assistance Dogs have a positive impact on the child's psychological wellbeing, positive social interactions, performance of activities, and participation in various life

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Steven Shannon with Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hanafin T.D., at his stand in the BT Young Scientist Exhibition in Ballsbridge, Dublin.

roles at home and in the community. An assistance dog can enrich the quality of life of children with Autism and their families. This study has identified real and potential benefits of a well-trained assistance dog for families with Autism. This research will help to develop the programme to provide Assistance Dogs to families of children with Autism by raising awareness of the benefits. This research clearly demonstrates that the assistance dog is a great help to these children and their families.

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Steven Shannon displaying his award and project at Sligo Grammar School.

Dr. Jimmy Devins, T.D. Junior Minister for Disability and Mental Health also visited the stand. Minister Devins supported my mother in the campaign to set up an autism specific unit in Our Lady of Mercy, Primary School, Sligo, in 2004. He praised the exceptional standard of my project and congratulated me on the work and level of commitment involved. There was a lot of interest in the stand and I handed out 200 information leaflets from the IGDB. A representative from Trinity College is interested in pursuing the research further to look at a cost benefit analysis of assistance dogs versus the cost of providing support services. I was interviewed by RTE and featured in the Irish Times. The whole experience was fantastic and I am looking forward to returning next year.

Mr. Wynne Oliver, Principle of the Sligo Grammar School congratulated me at Assembly. All the staff and pupils have congratulated me and I will be featured on the website and magazine. The CEO of the IGDB is coming to the school to present an award in acknowledgement of my achievement.

Thank you to all the parents who took part in my study, the autism staff of the HSE West, my parents and teachers who supported me. A special thank you to the staff and dog trainers of the Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind for all your assistance with the project.

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