“One Welfare: Concerns Surrounding Assistance Dogs”

1. Introduction

Summary

One Welfare (Garcia Pinillos, 2018) implies that the welfare of both the human and the Assistance Dog (AD) are of equal importance. Welfare issues for ADs, specifically those assisting children with autism are explored and means of mediating these at individual level across the AD industry are considered.

What is Autism

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterised by deficits in social communication and interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

What is an Assistance (service) Dog?

These dogs are trained to alleviate people’s disabilities to enable improved wellbeing and independence (Assistance Dogs UK, 2015).

• Autism ADs provide safety and facilitate a more independent and socially inclusive life for the child and family (Support Dogs, 2017).

Benefits of dogs for children with ASD and their families.

• Presence of a dog can encourage socially appropriate behaviour, such as engagement in activities (Redefer & Goodman, 1989).

• ADs have been shown to increase calmness (Bugnyarie at al, 2017) and decrease anxiety (Stace, 2016) in children with ASD.

• ADs, attached to children, can use their weight to stop a child from bolting, giving parents time to intervene and alleviate parental stress (Burrows, & Millman, 2008).

• To date, evidence is compromised by small samples and imperfect research designs (Berry, Borgi, Francia, Alleva & Cirulli, 2013). More rigorous work is needed to evaluate the efficacy of ADs.

2. Background

Welfare issues for ADs, specifically those assisting children with autism are explored and means of mediating these at individual level across the AD industry are considered.

5. Causes of Welfare Issues: A Dog is Still a Dog...

Welfare issues may arise as an AD ages. Family and dog may be frustrated as the dog no longer works as effectively as before. The AD may experience increased fatigue. This raises issues for the AD's fate within the family.

• One dog was returned (Burrows et al, 2008), due to undesirable behaviour or not meeting expectations.

• Dogs may also be returned and rehomed at the end of their working life.

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• The child also grows, and their increased size may make physical handling more difficult.

• Families must understand the importance of meeting the dog’s needs and friendship in support of their working life.

Training, Placement and End of Working Life

To be successful, ADs, like companion dogs, must be well bred, appropriately exposed to the animal and inanimate world and trained with positive reinforcement methods (Appleby, 2016, McBride and Montgomery, 2012). The AD is often introduced to “puppy walkers” for the first 9/12-18 months before being allocated to training kennels for some 6 months of advanced training before being placed with the recipient (Burrows et al, 2008). As with rescue dogs, multiple behaviours can cause welfare issues, including problem behaviour and increased likelihood of failure.

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3. Why Animal Welfare?

• We have ethical and legal obligations to animals. They are totally dependent on us for their care and wellbeing (Mellor, 2016) for the whole of their lifespan.

• We need to ensure we provide for each individual animal’s physical health and mental wellbeing as indicated by the Five Freedoms. Animals should at least have a life worth living and ideally a good life, Mellor (2006).

• Meeting animals’ needs increases overall health, resistance to stress, desirable behaviour, motivation and companionship (Broom and Fraser, 2015).

• Advantages for ADs include: lower drop out and higher trainer success rates, more effective working, reduced unnecessary training and costs and longer working life.

• Dogs have cognitive and emotional lives and are often considered family members. However, they have ‘dog-specific’ needs.

• Attributing human thoughts and feelings to the AD can, unintentionally cause welfare issues (O’Farrell, 1995). For example:

• Feeding human food can lead to obesity, exercise intolerance and painful health conditions.

• Inappropriate physical interactions, such as tight hugging as may be ok with humans, can be confusing, distressing and painful for dogs.

• ADs may have little control over their environment (Figure 2), as in not being able to avoid unpleasant situations. Lack of control negatively affects physical and mental wellbeing (Serpell, Coppenge & Fine, 2006). Examples include:

• Diving or taking too long to deal with stress and interesting soundscapes and reduced training.

• Unclear human behaviour of adults or children can be interpreted by dogs (Shepherd, 2007), including bending over, rapid movement, staring.

• Children with ADs, who struggle to express their own needs (e.g., may struggle to use socially accepted language and body language) and often do not or cannot react to the AD’s needs.

• Lack of gentle eye contact, verbal reinforcement with the dog can reduce the dog’s engagement with the child/family and motivation to work. This can lead to stress in the dog who is unable to remove itself from the work situation.

• Children with ADs can show aggressive behaviour towards their family (Dominic, D., Aspinall, J., Tager-Flusberg, H., & Serpell, J. A. (2006).

• ABIs are often placed with “puppy walkers” for the first 9/12-18 months before being allocated to training kennels for some 6 months of advanced training before being placed with the recipient (Burrows et al, 2008).

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4. Welfare issues for ADs with ASD children & family

Burrows et al. (2008) using interview and direct observation, dog performance and welfare data was collected from 11 dog-family partnerships over the first 6-12 months after placement. They found that although unintentional:

• “Children with autism were often significant sources of physical stress for the dogs”, see figure 2.

• Some dog behaviour problems were noted (e.g., aggression, fretting), including physical contact and rough play. This may indicate that children lack skills to call off contact, or they have difficulty in interpreting the dog’s needs.

• In advanced training, the AD may need to be returned to training to improve its working skills. This can lead to a breakdown in the child’s trust in the dog.

5. Complications

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6. How Can We Move Forward?

At Family Level: Education

• Familiarise yourself with the importance of meeting the dog’s needs and correctly interpreting and responding to its behaviour.

At Industry Level: Standardisation

• Not all Assistance Dogs are adequately and/or appropriately trained and fit for purpose (Assistance Dogs UK, 2015; Brehmorton, Mogillo, Howell, Marinelli, 2018).

• These dogs may be distressed and confused and may become frightened and aggressive in working situations, including in public places.

• Extra care may result in rehoming or euthanising if an adult/child is bitten.

• The European Committee for Standardization (CEN) is currently exploring an EU wide standardisation of terminology and definitions, training and assessment.

7. An Alternative Future?

Robots

Both humanoid robots and robotic dogs have potential to facilitate social development, engagement in activities and interactions and reduce autistic difficulties in children (see figures 3 & 4) (Stanton, Kahn, Severson, Ruckert & Gill, 2008; Robins, Dautenhahn & Dickerson, 2009).

• Robotics and artificial intelligence is a rapidly advancing area of technology.

• In the near future, robots may be able to reduce the need for Assistance Dogs in various circumstances.

• This may include for children with ASD.

• This could be the benefit of dog welfare.

8. Conclusion

• Education and standardisation of training is needed to ensure the welfare of ADs, children with ASD, families, and the public, are not compromised.

• Alternative methods of managing and supporting families and children with ASD, such as the use of robots, should continue to be explored.

• There is minimal research into the welfare of ASD Assistance Dogs, thus further research into ADA affordability and welfare is needed.

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