All in a Day's Work

Including Children with Developmental Disabilities into Dog Training

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FIRST PLACE WINNER

I am standing in the middle of a group of puppy owners, all of whom look just a little overwhelmed. You know that look-the "What have I done?" look. The puppies range in age from 16 weeks to 5 months and have all been recently adopted from the shelter offering this free class. They yip, they yap, they mouth on their owners and pull on their leashes. All very typical. Also increasingly typical is the conversation I have with one of the owners after class. He tells me that he has a seven-year-old son with a developmental disability. The child and pup are having a great deal of difficulty building a positive relationship. Can I help them?

Developmental disabilities—the very broad category that includes autism spectrum disorders, cognitive functioning impairments, attention deficit issues, behavioral challenges, and motor skill difficulties—are on the rise. A 2004 study in the American Journal of Medical Genetics estimated that 17% of children in the United States have a developmental disability (Rice et al.), while the Autism Society of America notes on its website that as many as 1 in 250 children in this country may have autism. Think about it. Most of us know at least one family dealing with a developmental disability. Was that the case when you were growing up?

As pet dog trainers, we must serve and work with the entire family unit. Sometimes that task is as easy one, as all family members jump on board to learn positive training methods and eagerly work together to educate their dog. More often, even in typical families, pet dog trainers must think carefully about family dynamics and how best to weave the individual personalities into a cohesive dog-supportive unit. Add in the complexity of a developmental disability in the family, and the potential for failure in the interspecies connection can increase dramatically.
When I am asked to help a family such as the one described, I am admittedly nervous—even as a special educator and the mother of two sons with developmental disabilities. Just as each dog we encounter brings an individual set of experiences and behaviors to the table, each child with a developmental disability presents with his/her own set of symptoms and needs. In this particular instance, the boy had both attending issues and glitches in central auditory processing—meaning that it took longer than usual to understand what was being said. He also had a great deal of trouble controlling his impulses, so often, in spite of what he knew about handling a puppy, he was excessively forceful in his interactions with the still small retriever mix. Although sweet in disposition, the dog had grown understandably skittish around the child. She, too, needed behavioral education, as she over-relied on her mouth to bet attention. (And in a house with a child with a developmental disability, the dog often doesn't receive attention until he/she engages in inappropriate behaviors, as the parents forget to reinforce calm and quiet bids for interaction.)

As challenging as working with special needs families can be, the potential for tremendous accomplishment is great. Temple Grandin points out in Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior (2005) that many individuals with developmental disabilities really have a profound love for and connection with their furry friends. In fact, I credit my house full of loving and forgiving canines with teaching my son with autism a great deal about social interaction. In special needs families the potential for inter-species enrichment is amazing. Dogs can allow a child with a developmental disability to grow and flourish in a truly joyous way. In return, the dog takes on a level of responsibility that enriches his/her life abundantly.

So where do we, as pet dog trainers, start? If the special needs family is interested in obtaining or training a dog specifically to work as an assistance dog, they may do well to look for an appropriate training facility. But, if the family is simply attempting to help their pet dog and child with a developmental disability mesh better, there are a number of ways in which we can help:

**Talk to everyone openly**

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The first, and maybe the hardest, hurdle to clear is concern about discussing the developmental disability with the family. Under the weight of political
correctness and the heartfelt desire not to offend, we are sometimes hesitant to ask for specific information regarding the child’s issues. As a parent, however, I can safely predict that most families will welcome questions that emanate from true concern. Rather than asking for specific diagnostic information, however, it is often useful to first ask if the child has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) at school. If so, the child is receiving special services of some kind. Asking for further information as to what kind of services the child receives will give you insight into what needs are being addressed by educators. For example, let's imagine that a child's IEP includes speech and language therapy and occupational therapy, but the child is included in general education classes without assistance. Such information tells you that the child probably has little or no cognitive impairment, but has trouble communicating, either in terms of speaking or understanding. (Maybe both.) Occupational therapy services imply that the child may have motor or sensory issues that will impact his/her ease in petting and handling the dog. You now know that you may need to take extra time to talk with the child about how to interact with Fido, perhaps including visuals to help illustrate your points. And you may need to make extra efforts to demonstrate how dogs like to be touched. (I use the cartoon character, Underdog, and accompanying ditty to remind kids to pet their furry friends under the chin and on the chest and sides, rather than the top if the head...).

Depending on the level of the child's involvement, you might even ask if some of the dog interaction techniques can be incorporated into lessons at school. Just as pet dog trainers want lots of ideas in their "toolboxes," special educators often welcome suggestions for helping a child generalize behaviors across environments. A child with autism, for example, may be using social priming to help navigate peer interactions. He/she may rehearse appropriate behaviors prior to trying them out at school through a method developed by Carol Gray called Social Stories." In this approach, the child writes—initially with adult help—a script for social interactions. Teachers may be willing to help the child draft a social story for interacting with the family dog, or attending training sessions.

**Ask for permission to touch the child while working with the family**

As dog trainers, we tend to be tactile people. We love to scratch, massage, and rub our canine friends. For children with developmental disabilities. Touching a dog appropriately may not come naturally. Yet canine-friendly touch is a valuable skill for them to learn, in terms of fostering the relationship with the family pet, and in terms of development of impulse control skills. Petting a dog
can also be a useful component in sensory integration training. Often the best way to teach this is hand-in-hand, perhaps even practicing first on family members and/or toys. Ask the child's parents if it's okay to touch their child when in their presence. Explain what you are going to do and what you are trying to achieve, demonstrating with a parent's hands if necessary. Working hand-over-hand also allows you sufficient control to insure that the dog is never touched too roughly.

**Use Peer Models**

Children with developmental disabilities can learn a great deal through peer modeling using neurotypical children. Siblings, neighbor kids, and friends can all help show the child with a developmental disability how to interact more successfully with his/her pet. Peer models with often willingly become "trainer's helpers" and will exhibit remarkable patience and enthusiasm working alongside the child with the developmental disability. Your accomplishment has now tripled: you've taught two children how to interact with and train the dog; you've helped the child with the developmental disability develop peer social skills; and you've given the typical child an opportunity to learn more about children with special needs! Prime the typical child before the session starts to make sure that he/she comprehends how the session will proceed, including that child's parent in the conversation.

**Impulse Control All Around**

Self-management skills are difficult to learn, both for canines and humans. Of course, this is what we do on a daily basis—we teach dogs to control the impulses that are natural for them and to instead offer us the behaviors we humans find appealing. Apply the same thinking to working with a child with a developmental disability and his/her parents. Instead of focusing on the child's mistakes, develop a plan for what you'd like to see the child do, and teach those skills. Break canine-interaction behaviors into the smallest possible components for the child. Keep training sessions short and positive for everyone. If the child doesn't find working with the dog inherently rewarding, find other reinforcers to help increase desired behaviors. And don't forget to praise the parents for stepping back and letting the child learn how to become dog-friendly, rather than immediately jumping in and taking over!

**Safe Always**
We all know what this means. But the rule when working with animals and children with developmental disabilities is to expect the unexpected, and don't give in to the temptation to push your luck, even just a little! In addition, you may need to help the parents come up with viable ways to insure that the child and dog are always adequately supervised.

Being a pet dog trainer isn't particularly lucrative. Yet it is a career which pays in unparalleled ways. The doggie kisses alone make our emotional coffers overflow. Working with the entire family unit is, I believe, where true job satisfaction lies. Involvement with special needs families can be an especially enriching experience, one which offers incomparable and unexpected bonuses.

I recently began working with a family that adopted an eight-year-old shelter dog. The shelter didn't happen to mention at adoption that the dog had a history of being snarky with children. The family has elected to work with the dog rather than return him, even though the eight-year-old son has a developmental disability with impulse control issues. Interestingly, the dog took to this little boy immediately, and has been nothing but patient. A recent training session gathered together the dog, the son, a young friend with autism, another dog and the two moms. Whew! With lots of "good listening" and "quiet hands," however, and a big dollop of self-management for all, we had a great time. And we all came away having learned just a bit more about how marvelous the canine-human bond can be. Especially me.

References


