



Learning the Language of Dogs Can be a Breakthrough Experience for Children with Autism

●●● BY KATHY SANTO ●●●

I've been a dog trainer professionally for 23 years, but if you ask my parents, they'll tell you that my fascination with dogs began at an early age. As a child, I'd spend hours hanging out with my dog as well as constantly seeking out the company of any dogs who may have wandered off their property. The fact that they were willing participants in my endless quest to teach them new and better tricks (lie down, walk on your hind legs, jump through a hula hoop) was only part of their allure; what really drew me toward them was the companionship that they offered. To know a dog was to be loved by a dog. What kid could resist that?

Becoming a trainer and working with kids and their dogs showed me all the evidence I ever needed to see that dogs and kids were meant to be together, and the right pairing of child to dog (coupled with proper training in obedience and mutual respect) yielded amazing results inside as well as outside their obedience classes. In schools across the country, children are learning to read more confidently when they practice reading to their dog through an organ-

ization called PAWS TO READ. Others are learning to enjoy exercise when agility is incorporated into their dog's basic obedience classes. Dogs are grand, that's just all there is to it.

Back a few years ago, life at my training school was great. I was seeing over 100 dogs a week (and still do!). I was reconciling owner and dog relationships as well as turning out competitive obedience and agility students who were doing their fair share of winning in the competition rings. All was well. Except for that tiny, nagging feeling that would whisper in my ear every now and again: "Isn't there anything else you can do with your talents?" Immediately I'd shake off the feeling by listing the shelter groups that I worked with; the dogs that I trained that were doomed for euthanasia if they didn't stop doing this or that; the people that were so happy with their newly trained dog; the kids that were loving agility so much that they were now competing in it. What else could I be doing?

It seems that my student, Linda Fiddle, founder of the Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation (www.djfiddlefoundation.org), had the answer. During one of the dog training classes she attends with her Havanese named Bella, Linda asked me if I thought I could do anything for children with autism and their dogs. Instinctually, I said, "Of course!" and laid out a plan for having children who attend The Forum School in Waldwick, NJ (a school that Linda has a special

connection to) attend dog training classes with their own dogs. The idea that I had was not to offer a service dog-type program (there are many amazing training schools for service dogs), but to take the dog that the family already owned and train it to obey commands.

Many children on the autism spectrum have companion dogs. Not all of the dogs are trained. The biggest reason that I heard from parents as to why they got a dog for their child was to give their child companionship. They believed that by bringing a dog into their family, the child would have an instant best friend. But sadly, Lassie and Timmy are television characters, and the real world doesn't always have Disney-esque happy endings. Many families wound up with dogs that were given no training and were subsequently difficult to manage. That meant that their addition to the family (through no fault of the dog, of course), instead of *relieving* some of the stress, had actually *increased* it! My belief is that in order to cement a bond and form a relationship, these dogs needed training, but their child needed to be the teacher.

Interestingly enough, as I'm writing this, I'm realizing how daunting this may seem to you, the reader. But not once did it ever cross my mind that this would be anything less than amazing. Turns out that it was all that and more. By the time Linda's dog class was over that morning, Linda and I were both so excited. She generously offered a grant to cover the class tuition and equipment for the children. My new program was officially off and running!

A few weeks later, a list of students who were attending was compiled, and before I knew it, the first day of "dog school" was in session. Each student and their dog was paired with one of my training assistants in order to have more individualized attention. This was greatly needed, because in reality, we weren't just training dogs to be obedient, we were also training the children to become dog trainers themselves! The children's mothers (much to their surprise) were told to relax and have a seat and watch the class. They were so used to having to be "hands on" that they actually had to get used to not jumping up and helping the child complete the tasks given to him or her. After the first session, they had completely acclimated and arrived at class with their Dunkin' Donuts cups of coffee, grateful for an hour where they could (from the sidelines) watch and enjoy their children and their accomplishments.

The first step was to teach the dogs some basic obedience commands, and since I'd been doing years of Kids and Dogs Camps, I had more than a few cool ideas to engage kids during the teaching of such scintillatingly-exciting dog commands as "Sit" and "Down." However, my new students had completely different ideas about what was engaging – and none of my ideas fit their criteria. What DID, however, were the large, colorful agility obstacles in my yard that I use

when teaching agility classes. At some point, every one of the kids wandered off in the direction of that equipment, and it was in that moment that I knew the direction this class was going to take.

It began as a sort of bartering system: "Ok, guys, if you do three sets of 'Sit' with your dogs, we'll teach them the Teeter Totter. Deal?" Immediately, dogs were being worked – sometimes at breakneck speeds – to accomplish the task in order to get to the "fun stuff." Eventually, I learned to leverage the teaching of agility into requests such as "let's hear you give that command more clearly three times and then we can work on the A-frame." The kids who were reluctant to give their dogs a treat and possibly make contact with a wet mouth were taught the alternative (throwing the treat), while their dogs were taught the command "Fetch."

It wasn't until halfway through the program when one of my assistants came up to me and said that these kids are doing a real agility course that I realized the magnitude of the classes. The dogs, who previously had no training and certainly had no attachment to their kids, were now bonded partners with them, hanging on their every movement and hoping to get to "play agility" together (something that the adults in the family did not and could not do with them). The kids not only had formed a close bond with their dogs, but they'd also had the unique experience of being a "teacher" to their dog –guiding, supporting, and helping them through every challenge they faced, whether it was coaxing them through a "scary" agility tunnel or encouraging them to come when they were called. The children learned about consistency as well as the trials, tribulations, and determination required to accomplish a common goal. And they learned to speak a new language—dog—as well as read and respect it, when necessary.

At graduation, the kids ran an honest-to-goodness, novice agility course. One mom had tears in her eyes and told me it was the first time she had seen her 15-year-old son run. After the performance, we had pizza and ice cream cake, although most of the kids just wanted to get their dogs (THEIR dogs now, not their parent's dogs) back on the equipment for more practice. As everyone was leaving, I noticed one of the boys walking the course without his dog, running his hand over the equipment as if he were trying to memorize it. His mom told me that every time he came to class, he would always say to her, "Only five more weeks, Mom. I wish it didn't have to end."

Fortunately, it hasn't. We had a holiday reunion party in December and made plans for this group to come back in the summer. And more groups have started as well as an in-school program for children with autism in Paramus, NJ.

I always tell people that the dogs have taught me well. In this case, so did the children. •

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