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# Autism spectrum disorder in veterinary clients: how the practice can help

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**Abstract:** Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disability affecting 1–2% of the population. Common characteristics include social anxieties, attachment to predictable routines and sensitivities to sensory stimuli. Certain traits of ASD contribute to excellent pet ownership, yet veterinary practice visits can be a source of considerable stress. This article outlines the legal responsibilities practices have to provide equal access to services and suggests a range of ways to meet these obligations. Home visits with a trusted member of the clinical team are recommended as one of the best methods for inclusion. A range of inexpensive and easy considerations are presented. The role of assistance dogs is discussed including animal welfare implications of which veterinary professionals should be aware.

**Keywords:** autism; autistic spectrum disorder; pets; pet ownership; assistance dogs; veterinary practice; disability; rights; discrimination; equality; district veterinary nurse

## Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a life-long neurodevelopmental condition often characterised by impairments of social communication alongside restrictions in interests and activities, and repetitive behaviours. There may be changes to sensory perceptions such as under- or over-sensitivity to stimuli such as smells, sound and touch (Schneider et al., 2017) and a co-occurrence of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (Eaton, 2018). Furthermore, anxiety, conduct problems and impulsivity all overlap with autism (Furfaro, 2018).

ASD manifests early in life and is thought to affect between 0.76% and 2.5% of the population, with males overrepresented in a ratio of 4:1 (Kogan et al., 2018; World Health Organisation, 2019). The aetiology of ASD is largely unknown. In the UK there are around 700,000 people on the autism spectrum, and if family members are included then ASD affects the lives of 2.8 million people (National Autistic Society, 2013). The severity of the condition varies considerably. Some people with ASD live independently while others require life-long support due to severe disabilities. People with ASD are often discriminated against and face stigma, isolation, emotional, psychological and economic burdens, and human rights violations (Mitter et al., 2019). The World Health Organisation

(2019) recommends "... broader actions for making physical, social and attitudinal environments more accessible, inclusive and supportive." There is no cure for ASD, but early diagnosis and evidence-based psychosocial interventions can reduce difficulties in social behaviour, enable improved communication and have a positive impact on wellbeing and quality of life, for the individual and for families or carers.

Autism is often framed in terms of negative effects or deficits, which can be damaging to the self-esteem of those with ASD. Having an appreciation of the challenges informs support systems but is not the whole story. Several qualities not only make them well equipped for certain activities or jobs, but also mean they can make excellent animal carers (Table 1):

**Table 1.** Ways in which people with ASD can make excellent pet carers

Enhanced observation skills.
Attention to detail and deep focus.
Need for routines and structure.
Analytical and organised.
Retaining knowledge. Long-term memory excellent, facts easily recalled.
Tenacity and resilience.
Innovative solutions to problems arise from unique thought processes.
Integrity, honesty, loyalty, and commitment.

These traits can result in a pet owner who has extensive knowledge, will adhere to best practice, can readily identify illness, will establish routines and patterns of care, will be reliable, truthful and dedicated, will be determined to face challenges and can discover new ways of working. A model client, perhaps. Or indeed, a model veterinary nurse.

## The benefits of pet ownership and animal assisted interventions

The benefits to humans from being around animals are well documented. People with ASD can benefit in ways specific to their condition (Bennie, 2018), see Table 2.

Animal assisted interventions are not a new phenomenon; as far back as the 9<sup>th</sup> century Belgian physicians used animals in the treatment of the disabled (Morrison, 2007). A wealth of literature supports their usefulness across a range of physical and mental health conditions (for literature reviews, see Mapes & Rosén, 2016; O’Haire, 2013a, 2013b, 2017).

An emerging therapeutic modality is the use of trained assistance dogs, with the primary function usually being child safety. Children with ASD can display bolting behaviours and the dogs are trained to anchor the child if they attempt to run and quicken the walking pace if they slow down by means of a harness and belt system (Figure 1). For this reason, larger breeds such as Retrievers are preferred. In addition, dogs may be trained to rest their head or body on a child if they are showing signs of meltdown, to track them using scent if they escape, to interrupt

repetitive behaviours and assist with transitions between environments. It is worth noting that much of the evidence in support of assistance dogs for autism has been anecdotal and further research is desirable (Butterly et al., 2013). In addition, it is important to examine the impacts on the dogs’ welfare. Burrows et al. (2008) identified several ways in which assistance dogs in the USA may be negatively impacted by their role:

- Lack of rest or recovery time
- Unintentional maltreatment
- Being startled or frightened by the child
- Insufficient opportunities for recreational activities
- Weight gain due to lack of off-leash exercise and/or overfeeding
- Lack of opportunities to eat or drink while working, especially if they accompany the child to school
- Stress associated with social deprivation as the dogs are encouraged to bond with only the handler and the child, to the exclusion of other family members or pets

As veterinary professionals we should be alert to these issues and address them where they are identified. Organisations accredited by Assistance Dogs International (ADI) work to high standards of welfare and training and offer comprehensive aftercare support. Further information can be obtained from ADI at <https://assistancedogsinternational.org/> or their accredited organisations.

While animals can have a positive impact, it is important to remember that alterations to normal life, such as those encountered when first getting a pet, can be difficult for autistic people to process. It is also important to note that animals may not be universally beneficial. ASD can be linked with extreme sensitivity to sensory stimuli and the noises, smells or textures of animals can be overwhelming to the point that positive beneficial interactions are impossible (O’Haire, 2013b).

## Our role in supporting clients and their animals

The relevance to us as veterinary professionals is that we may be called upon to assist with the care and treatment of pets and assistance animals, as well as having clients or parents of children with autism visit the practice. In common with other disabilities ASDs are provided for in several pieces of legislation and official guidance (Table 3). The Equality Act 2010 makes clear that service providers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments



Figure 1. Child and assistance dog attached by harness and lead system. Image courtesy of Dogs for Good.

to service provision to avoid indirect discrimination. It is incumbent on practices, in common with other service providers, to adhere to the statutory guidance regarding disabilities and accessibility, as to avoid doing so can lead to civil action in the County Court.

We have a legal obligation to ensure equality of access to services yet there seems to be limited advice as to how best to do this. Many parents of children with ASD simply do not bring their children with them to the practice. However, adults with ASD may visit in person and there are a range of ways we can make this less stressful.

## Practical tips for veterinary clinics

Home visits can be extremely useful. Anxieties around visiting the practice are removed, family members can be involved and there is minimal change to established routines.

- Prior to the first visit provide the client with a guide or story that outlines the consultation process in clear language. Being mentally prepared can significantly reduce anxiety in novel situations.
- The client may wish to visit the practice in advance to become familiar with the premises and staff and ask questions.
- In addition, getting to know the vet or nurse in advance can build rapport and ease social discomforts.

Table 2. Potential benefits to children with ASDs from animal-assisted interventions and pet ownership

Benefit
Reduced anxieties
Reduced panic attacks
Reduction in OCD symptoms
Reduced agoraphobia
Decreased feelings of depression
Increased empathy
Improved family functioning
Increased feelings of inclusion
Improved social interactions
Increased feelings of connectivity
Improved physical health due to increased activity levels
Increased playfulness
Increased language

Table 3. Legislation and guidance covering ASD and other disabilities

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
The Disability Discrimination Act 1995
The Equality Act 2010
The Autism Act 2009
'Think Autism' the 2014 Government autism strategy

- Having one vet or nurse that the client always sees can help them with predictability and reduce anxiety. Make notes on their account to record their preference.
- Reassure clients that they can bring a friend, family member or support worker.
- It may be useful to obtain contact details of their support network in case things do not go to plan, or the client becomes agitated or needs help with decision making.
- Reduce waiting times. Sitting in a noisy busy waiting room is highly stimulating. Where possible provision should be made to allow clients to be seen straight away. This may involve making appointments at quieter times.
- If it is not possible to be seen straight away, offer the client the choice of waiting in the consulting room. This allows them to remove themselves from the stimulating environment of the waiting room and gives them the opportunity to become familiar with the space and the sensory world of the practice.
- Make enquiries with the client or their support network concerning the best ways to communicate. Social interactions are often stressful and verbal information can be lost in a sea of competing demands on their attention. It can be hard to prioritise sensory inputs and the sound of a distant phone ringing may mean they miss everything you say. Written information may help, or links to video information. In addition, follow-up phone calls or emails can be helpful to ensure the important points have been adequately communicated. It is important to note that it is often not a lack of cognitive ability that impedes the intake of information, but rather the environment in which the information is transmitted, or the form in which it is provided.
- Avoid ambiguities. Be clear and direct and remember that some people with ASD think very literally and really do not understand sarcasm, even if it is friendly or funny.
- Allow time for the client to make decisions. They may want to consult friends or family.
- Be aware of the techniques used by handlers of assistance dogs. You may notice the dog resting their head on the autistic person's lap to provide sensory input of deep pressure or putting their paw on their leg for example. Try to avoid disrupting these behaviours or perhaps incorporate them into the consultation.
- Allow time. Extended slots may be needed to allow for in depth questioning or for

occasional breaks both for the client and the animal if anxiety levels are rising.

- Above all, ask what will work for the client. They may need no adjustments at all, or they may have unique traits that pose additional challenges or opportunities.
- Communicate clearly on your practice website or social media page that people with disabilities are welcome and that every effort will be made to accommodate their needs. Perhaps inform local support groups so they can share with their members. There is a legal obligation to ensure equality of access, so share what you are doing to comply with this. Not everyone with ASD, or any other disability, will tell you they have it, or ask for any help. Invite them to discuss their needs with you.
- Where children with ASD are brought to the practice the following may also be helpful:
  - Consider an "autism hour" like those offered in supermarkets and cinemas.
  - Ensure everything is clean. Some children with ASD will hide under chairs, lie on the floor, or put objects in their mouths. Alternatively, allow access to washing facilities if desired.
  - Reduce levels of lighting and noise. Some lights emit a highly stimulating electronic buzz or whine.
  - Close doors securely, preferably lock them, as bolting is a common behaviour.
  - Have someone on standby to assist the parent with animal handling, making sure doors remain closed, or to provide positive distractions.
  - Provide stress relieving toys such as fidget spinners and be ok with not getting them back.

## Conclusion

Autism is a mixed bag of gifts and hindrances. Autistic people can make excellent pet owners, and many may receive benefits from animal assisted interventions such as service dogs. People who are affected by autism, either directly or indirectly, are entitled to understanding and support and we should consider how we can best do that by being open to dialogue and modifying our practices in small ways. A range of considerations are presented which are inexpensive and easy to implement but most important is being open to discussion. Home visits are particularly desirable and having dedicated staff such as mobile or district veterinary nurses can help with bonding.

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