



Birmingham Public Schools ♦ Disability Awareness Workshop

Guide Dogs

Guide dogs provide an almost immeasurable service to their visually impaired owners. Working together, an owner and his/her guide dog can navigate a myriad of everyday obstacles. This permits the owner to have both a fine companion and a much greater degree of freedom.

Types of Dogs

The most common breeds of seeing-eye dogs are German Shepherds and Labrador Retrievers. These dogs are most often chosen because of their size, temperament, and ability to learn; attributes well suited for a guide dog. Given their "good size", these dogs are big enough to wear a harness to help direct their handler, but small enough to fit on public busses and in other confined areas. Other breeds such as Golden Retrievers may be used as guide dogs too.

Training Methods

There are different methods of training a guide dog. Common methods start with the puppy's socialization. Children are often excellent at socializing puppies. Local 4-H groups are often involved with the placement of puppies with children who will help prepare them for future training. They learn basic commands and good manners at this time. During the puppy's first year they are taught to interact with people and are introduced to a variety of situations. The greater the variety of situations they face the better it is for the dog. Such experience will be valuable when they encounter unusual events under a wide range of circumstances.

Once a dog has been socialized, they move on to more intensive training. Often performed at a training school, a guide dog will spend six months to a year learning exactly how to guide. They learn how to direct their handler in a straight line; they are taught to stop at any elevation change such as stairs, or a curb; and to maneuver appropriately through a myriad of obstacles. After this training they are introduced to their new owner who will work with the dog for a period of time to ensure they work well together.

Not all dogs are able to become a guide. They may drop out of the program at any time for any number of reasons. If personalities, ability to learn, technical skill, are not up to par, a dog may not be able to complete the training. Guide dogs must socialize well, adjust to being away from their first owner and in a new environment, learn the required skills, and finally match up well with their new owner. It takes a special dog to complete this rigorous training. Upon graduating from the guide dog program, the dog is prepared to assist his handler to live in a bigger world with even greater freedom.

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Guide Dogs Continued

The first school for training Guide Dogs was established by the German government after World War I for the benefit of blinded veterans. Schools now exist in several European countries and the United States, where the pioneer Seeing Eye, Inc., founded by Dorothy Harrison Eustis in 1929 and established near Morristown, N.J., in 1932, is the best known. Approximately 10% of the blind population can use seeing-eye dogs successfully, that fraction including scores of persons who have achieved new independence through their assistance. Applicants may be rejected on the basis of sufficient useful vision, advanced age, poor health, or unsuitable temperament.

How Does a Guide Dog Know Where to Go When Leading the Blind?

- Although guide dogs for the blind are trained to navigate around obstacles, they are partially (red-green) color blind. Guide dogs' color vision deficiency makes them unable to perceive differences between some of the colors that humans can distinguish. In spite of their intelligence and the potential developed during training, guide dogs for the blind lack the capacity to read or interpret street signs. Thus, even though they are trained to walk in straight lines and avoid obstacles from both sides or above, guide dogs could not sense the safety or harm when crossing a road. Guide dogs can not interpret traffic patterns in order to determine when it is safe to cross a busy street.
- Since guide dogs do not read the traffic lights or understand traffic flow nor do they make the decision to cross the street, it is the guide dog user's task to give the command to go forward. Initially, the guide dog's handler listens for the traffic movements. When the guide dog owner determines it is safe to move on, they give the signal and cross the street. However, if the guide dog senses danger in crossing even if it is given a command, it will refuse the command. This is called "intelligent disobedience". This situation may occur if the guide dog user would misjudge the traffic or if there is a sudden change in the motorists' movements.
- Training programs for guide dogs for the blind emphasize the importance of teamwork between guide dogs and guide dog users. The human half of the guide dog partnership is responsible for directing, based upon skills acquired in previous mobility trainings.
- The handlers or the guide dogs owners are like aircraft navigators who must know where to go and how to get from one place to another; the guide dogs on the other hand are the pilots who get them safely to their destination.
- There have been many cases when there has been a lapse in judgment on the part of the human member of the team, and guide dogs for the blind have heroically saved lives at the risk of their own as they protected their partners from dangerous situations and accidents. Guide dogs for the blind are indeed priceless assets for every blind owner to cherish and likewise care for.