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| **Captions:** | Photo: Photos by John Rennison, the Hamilton Spectator  Jamil Shah, 11, waits while his dog Sherlock has his 'work' coat put on. Although parents Salma and Sam initially worried about whether Jamil would bond with a dog and whether the dog would be afraid of the boy's erratic behaviour, it was apparent within a week of Sherlock's arrival that he was a great addition to their home. 'Sherlock is almost bringing Jamil to what a normal person is like, ' his mother says.  Photo:   Photo: Autistic children like Jamil, above, may miss social cues and display inappropriate behaviour. Dr. Peter Szatmari, a leading expert on autism at Chedoke-McMaster Hospital, would like to see more trained dogs made available for autistic children. 'Demonstrating the impacts scientifically would be really tou gh to do but why do we need to? The benefits are obviously there.' |
| **Dateline:** |  |
| **Text:** | Jamil Shah's 11-year-old brain is wracked with overpowering sights and  sounds. Bright lights pierce his eyes, squealing sounds grip his ears. Words jump out from pages and swim around obsessively in his mind.  He just can't bear to be touched sometimes. What feels like a caress to most feels like being jabbed with hot pokers to the severely autistic boy.  For a long time, Jamil couldn't express himself in words, so no one understood his constant pain. It felt better when he banged his head against a wall. When his senses crush him, he reacts by thrashing, biting, kicking -- anything that will make the forces in his mind and body retreat.  Sometimes he even scares his own mother.  But after a few short months with his service dog, a bright-eyed golden retriever named Sherlock, Jamil is fighting to control himself. He doesn't give in to the violent temper tantrums as much anymore and when he does, he struggles to bring himself under control much faster.  "Sherlock will get scared if I take longer, " Jamil explained to his mother recently.  When Jamil's parents, Salma and Sam, decided to bring a service dog into their home to work with their troubled son, they wondered whether an animal could get through to him. Wouldn't a dog be too frightened of his unpredictable behaviour?  Would Jamil, who is largely locked within himself, reach out to bond with a dog?  Would they be setting their lonely son up for more rejection if the dog withdrew from Jamil just like so many others fearful of his outbursts?  The answer was clear within a week of Sherlock's arrival at their Oakville home in May. He began intervening in Jamil's tantrums, pushing himself close to the flailing boy to offer comfort.  Now Jamil clutches at the dog's fur, seeming to draw on the animal's sense of calm.  "Sherlock is almost bringing Jamil to what a normal person is like. He's bringing out his humanity, " says mother Salma.  That is a wonderful, but totally unexpected, result of bringing Sherlock home. The Shahs got the dog to keep Jamil from bolting into traffic.  The payoff was almost immediate.  The first week the boy was hooked up to a harness on the dog, Sherlock held Jamil back from running in front of a speeding car downtown.  Children with autism -- a largely mysterious neurological disorder -- are often fearless. They have little sense of danger or consequences. Parents must often hold on tightly to their children, something that grows ever more physically and emotionally difficult as the child grows up.  Autistic kids are often resistant to touch or want to be touched or held only on their terms.  Some autistic children are exceedingly quiet and withdrawn, while others behave erratically or violently.  The result is that outings -- from simple walks to meals in restaurants -- become an exhausting endeavour for both parent and child.  It's often easier just to stay home, with the result that families become isolated and children don't get the socialization that helps them progress.  Service dogs offer respite and peace of mind for parents and a sense of independence and pride for children who are often lonely and ignored. Many parents of autistic children feel their child is invisible until they begin acting out.  Then the dirty looks begin.  Service dogs not only help children remain calm, but also indicate to strangers that he or she is a special-needs child -- not just the spoiled brat of rotten parents. When out in public, the dogs are tethered to their young charges.  The dog listens to commands given by a parent.  At each intersection, the dog is told to stay, preventing the child from getting away. In stores and restaurants, the dog helps keep the child occupied and relaxed.  At home, off-duty, the dogs are ordinary, though extraordinarily well trained family pets. And as only dogs can, they offer unconditional love and a sense of consistency and companionship for children who often see the world as arbitrary, overwhelming and frightening.  "We expected the security Sherlock would bring, but we didn't expect how fine-tuned the dog would be to Jamil, " says Salma.  "We expected it would take a year. We didn't expect the bond so soon. Sherlock just seems to instinctively know how to approach Jamil."  And Jamil is responding. He reaches out to pat the dog and worries when he's not around. Those are huge milestones for an autistic child.  "Jamil has had this space around him that no one could enter. Sherlock is invading that, " Salma says.  And more people are paying attention to Jamil. When he's out with Sherlock, people who would normally ignore a quiet child who mutters rapidly but unintelligibly to himself, come up and ask about the dog. Jamil answers their questions in a rapid-fire, robotic kind of voice. That's crucial to improving his speech.  "People have no compassion for people who look normal, but are not. Having the service dog might point out the child is special needs and they might make more allowances. If it helps people be more compassionate towards my son, I don't care if he's identified as special needs, " says Salma.  \* \* \*  Ten tiny pudgy bodies stand on their hind legs and peek out from their pen in a pose reminiscent of those irresistible puppy calendars.  It's hard to believe that in a matter of months, this yapping, biting, tangled mass of brown, yellow and black fur will become champions for some of the most vulnerable and misunderstood children in society.  This litter of seven-week-old Labradors will be the graduates of service dog training in 2005. In only a few days, they will be farmed out to puppy-raisers for eight months to a year to learn basic socialization and obedience. Then they'll head into a rigorous six-month training regime before they are placed in homes with autistic children. The dogs' main job is keeping the children safe but as only dogs can, they also provide unlimited love.  A training school in New Hamburg, just outside Kitchener, is the only school solely dedicated to training dogs to work with autistic kids. National Service Dogs (NSD) has placed about 50 dogs across the country since 1996.  The school began with a sobbing mother who called a national service-dog school looking for help for her autistic son.  Heather Fowler answered the phone. The Cambridge woman had called all over North America looking for help for her five-year-old.  She broke down in tears when told there were no autism dogs at that school either. Fowler's husband was training dogs to help people with physical disabilities and seizure disorders. He decided to try to help the family. Once word got out, there were 30 requests for a dog. The school soon followed.  "At first, we thought we could be all things to all people and do physical disabilities and seizure dogs, " says NSD president Danielle Forbes of Hamilton.  "But then we decided last fall that other schools out there are doing this so well and that autism is underserviced.  "So now, 90 per cent of dogs are placed there. We're the only school in North America focusing on it."  Dogs are chosen based on their size (bigger is better for holding back headstrong youngsters), temperament (patience, calmness and tol erance), health and willingness to work.  The primary breeds are Labs and retrievers, although NSD is looking into breeding standard poodles for children with allergies.  There is an 18 to 24-month waiting list to get a service dog and it's far from first come, first served.  Dogs are carefully matched with the personality of the child and lifestyle of the family. It's a delicate and crucial relationship, says head trainer Wade Beattie.  "We basically go by our gut. We know the dogs so well and we get to know how they will fit into the family. We have to know for sure that the dog will be a positive addition and that they will be treated well."  Dogs are generally placed with children aged four to eight, although exceptions have been made based on the need, size and condition of the child.  Sherlock has held Jamil back from running in front of a speeding car. The dogs allow autistic children and their parents to get out of the house more, meaning they lead a more normal life and the child has more opportunity to socialize.  Families must demonstrate that a dog will help them, that they are committed to the work that training a dog requires and that their child will not be fearful or aggressive with the dog. They must also be committed to helping raise the $12,000 needed to raise the animal.  After a family is accepted in the program and linked up with a dog, one or both parents spend a week at the training school learning to handle the dog and bonding with it. It's a crucial time. The dog must come to think of the person giving the commands as its pack leader -- alpha dog.  For some people, it's a totally new experience. They've never had a dog and not only do they have to come to understand this baffling creature, they have to hook up their child to it and hit the streets.  So after a week, the parents load up the dog in a car or a plane and head home to introduce their new furry housemate to their child. But the dog doesn't begin its work as a service dog until a trainer from NSD comes to link the child and dog together.  They work as a quartet -- dog, trainer, parent and child -- taking ever more ambitious outings until, eventually, the trainer can slowly withdraw and let the group become a trio.  \* \* \*  Kyle Vanderaar, 17, sits in a living room chair and flips the pages of a store catalogue. He doesn't read the words or look at the pictures, he doesn't really even glance at the pages at all. Instead, he likes the feel of the pages in his hands, the sound of the rustling paper and watching the glossy pages flip over.  He could spend hours this way. And the whole time, his trusty black Lab, Raven, lies at his feet.  Kyle is autistic, profoundly deaf, developmentally delayed and had mild cerebral palsy. He doesn't speak but understands and uses sign language. Raven has been his service dog for more than two years. The family waited more than three years to get her and couldn't imagine life now without her calming presence.  "Kyle is not like his brothers with friends coming and going. Raven is his friend and companion. She makes him more secure and relaxed, " says mom Debbie.  Raven gives him kisses, lays on his bed beside him and waits for his bus when he's coming home from school. She doesn't care that he doesn't speak to her or give her loads of attention.  Raven is devoted to him anyway. Family albums are filled with pictures of the two. Staring at each other the day they first met. His arm draped comfortably over her on the front porch. A forlorn Kyle and Raven saying goodbye as Kyle leaves for camp.  "They're dogs, they're not perfect. They slip up sometimes but I think she's pretty near perfect, " Debbie says proudly as Raven sleeps nearby.  Kyle used to run away from home and school. Since Raven came along, he hasn't done that. She gives the tall, lanky, handsome boy some independence when he is out in public. The dog has improved his self-esteem and he is more social and confident with people.  "She's given us peace of mind in a way I can't explain. You can see how proud he is when he goes out with his dog. She gives him a sense of independence. It's nice that he has someone that's special for him."  A walk around their Cambridge neighbourhood shows Raven's off-duty and on-duty personas. At first, she goes out without her jacket. She's a typical dog -- sniffing everything, lollygagging, veering back and forth, stopping to pee here and there.  Once that purple jacket gets snapped on, she's a different dog. She looks straight ahead, focused and alert. Debbie tells Kyle to walk out on the quiet street after telling Raven to stay. No matter how much he pulls, the big dog stays seated. She won't come when a visitor tries to coax her out of a stay. She's not confused when Debbie tries to trick her by telling her to stay and then pulling her leash. Raven will only listen to voice commands.  Every day is training day for Raven, says Debbie. For some parents of autistic children, that kind of time and energy for a dog is just too much. Debbie agrees it's a lot of work, but she doesn't have a second thought.  "In some ways, it's actually more work, but it's worth it when I see the smile on my son's face and how proud he is."  The benefits of having a dog are obvious to Rachelle and Dave Peterson.  Buddy, an abnormally tall chocolate Lab, moved into their London-area home in May. The effects were immediate.  After an initial bout of resistance, Jed, their eight-year-old autistic son, soon gave in to being tied up to Buddy when outside. He calls the tether to Buddy his seatbelt.  Not only does that give the family a sense of security -- since Jed has a history of bolting in front of garbage trucks and refusing to move -- the connection has forced the boy to speak more. Before Buddy, Jed would just run to what he wanted. Now, he has to verbalize his needs.  "At first I felt really guilty that we had this dog and he wasn't able to be a dog. He's more of a wheelchair, " says Rachelle.  "But now I see that Buddy really loves to work."  And Jed loves that he can be out in public without one of his parents protectively holding onto his hand, his hood or his belt loop. But Buddy's presence has also meant the family must adjust to being something of a public spectacle.  Jed is a cute, blond boy who mostly behaves very well in public. In other words, no one would ever guess he is special needs. But when he's attached to a dog wearing a service jacket, that anonymity goes out the window.  "We are identified now. We've never had to face that before. It's a real adjustment for us to have people staring."  But Rachelle can't imagine life without the dog. He stays at home with her when Jed makes the hour-long trek to a special needs school. Buddy eases the stress of having Jed so far from home. The family has great confidence that Buddy is key to helping Jed cope the best he can with his autism.  "The dog will keep him safe and school will help him progress. We just have to accept him for who he is and just love him."  \* \* \*  There is much that remains unknown about autism. It is a genetic neurological disorder in which certain parts of the brain, known as the "social brain, " have not developed normally.  Those parts of the brain govern speech, language, social communication and sensory perception. Many people with autism have average or above average intelligence.  The condition crosses a wide spectrum of severity. Some autistic people are quite successful and live normal lives. They may be shy, quiet and eccentric. They may miss social cues, display inappropriate behaviour and be incapable of putting themselves in someone else's shoes.  On the other end of the spectrum, people with autism often appear locked in their own world. They may be either extremely sensitive to sight, sound and touch or have little reaction to sensations.  They display an inability to play with imagination or to imitate others. Instead, they take refuge in repetitive actions such as spinning objects, rocking or throwing balls. They are often very good at remembering details and seeing the "tree in the forest."  Severe autism also affects language. Autistic children often understand all that is said to them but seem unable to generate verbal responses. It is like there is a dam that blocks speech, explains Dr. Peter Szatmari, a leading expert on autism at Chedoke-McMaster Hospital.  People with severe autism cannot categorize their experiences. Every experience is unique and new. That is overwhelming because to them, the world appears arbitrary and confusing, says Szatmari.  Recent data shows autism spectrum is found in about one in 250 to 300 kids. That's far more common than once thought. The most severe form of autism is found in about one in 500 children. The condition is four times more common in boys but when it does appear in girls, it is usually in its most serious forms, says Szatmari.  Problems with development usually become apparent in a child's toddler years. But in less severe cases, deficits aren't really apparent until adolescence or even adulthood.  There is much hope in genetic research and in improvements in diagnosis and treatment, says Szatmari. But families with autistic children are often left to fend for themselves because clinical resources are in drastically short supply.  "There are abominable conditions for adults with autism. Many are shoved into group homes or simply cast off. It's a shame when there are so many possibilities. We will pay for our lack of compassion.  "It is very frustrating to give a diagnosis and know there are not enough resources to back it up. If a child had cancer of other medical problems, there would be no problem with resources."  Szatmari says service dogs are a wonderful treatment option for many autistic children. The dogs get to the root of autism in several ways.  They get these children out into the community, which is vital to their social development and reducing the stigma surrounding the disorder.  Caring for the animals helps foster empathy in children who often can't see beyond their own needs. Dogs create consistency and routine, something autistic children crave.  And, as in any family, a dog enhances quality of life. Homes with autistic children can often be stressed. Dogs create a sense of calm.  "They're fabulous. I'd love to see more dogs available for kids, " says Szatmari.  "There has been no systematic observation or study of dogs with autistic kids but anecdotally we hear things about children talking to their dog and not to others.  "Demonstrating the impacts scientifically would be really tough to do but why do we need to? The benefits are obviously there."  Indeed they are.  Twelve-year-old Scott Landry happily bounds ahead of his mother on an energetic walk with his dog, Archie. The 90-pound chocolate Lab who hasn't exactly left puppy behind and seems about to wag himself out of his body when a visitor arrives, is nothing but focus and maturity on a family walk through a leafy Oakville neighbourhood.  Archie became part of the Landry family last November. Scott's mother, Francine, didn't think she wanted to add a dog to a house already teeming with three kids and two cats. And anyway, they really aren't dog people.  Then one day, a worker at the house didn't shut the front door properly.  Scott got outside and wandered down to a nearby pier. He was found by police and his family before he got in the water but it was a wakeup call for his parents.  "On our walks, we would physically have to hold Scott to keep him from running out onto the road. He's getting too old and too big for that now, " says Francine. Taking Archie to friends' houses and restaurants gives Scott's parents an unaccustomed chance to socialize again. Before, Scott would tear around. Now, Archie stays with him and keeps him calm.  "A lot of families with autistic kids feel they have to isolate themselves. Archie gives us a chance to get out a lot more, " says Francine. So, in less than a year, the Landrys have definitely become dog people.  "Archie is really wonderful. He has given us more of a sense of calmness.  "We don't have the sense of being on high alert all the time. We're more relaxed. We go more places. He gives Scott more independence.  "Having him has been better than we ever imagined." |