Dogs (Canis familiaris) have been “man’s best friends” since the beginning of time. This timeless relationship continues to evolve into new kinds of human-dog interactions that increasingly benefit society.

Traditionally, dogs have aided humans in tasks such as hunting, livestock herding, and guarding. However, as society moved from small rural communities to increasingly large metropolitan areas, the roles of dogs have changed. Throughout the years, dogs located missing persons and assisted in rescue operations in the aftermath of disasters such as earthquakes and bomb explosions. Dogs participate in law enforcement activities and have been particularly successful in detecting narcotics. Dogs even served, along with soldiers, in patrol assignments during World War II and the Vietnam War (Figure 1). Today, dog companionship has taken on a new meaning as Americans increasingly consider their dogs another member of the family rather than just property.

More than 77.8 million American households own one or more dogs (APPA, 2015-2016). Furthermore, according to a public opinion poll, the majority of dog owners cited companionship as the main reason for having a dog (Jones, 2007). After all, dogs are nonjudgmental, give unconditional love, can be trusted with our most intimate feelings and emotions, and are highly intelligent; hence, highly trainable to do almost anything. These dog characteristics can enhance the lives of thousands of youths and adults, especially those with disabilities and/or those who live in continuing care facilities.

According to the 2013 state report issued by Cornell University’s Employment and Disability Institute, 14.9% or 409,700 of the 2,743,200 individuals ages 21 to 64 in Alabama reported at least one disability. Of this total, 15.3% or 217,100 of the 1,420,100 females of all ages and 14.6% or 192,600 of the 1,323,100 males of all ages in Alabama reported one or more disabilities. Furthermore, 19.6% that reported ambulatory difficulty live in group quarters such as rehabilitation centers, shelters, and nursing homes.

By embracing Canis familiaris, residents in rehabilitation and learning centers and nursing homes, patients in hospitals, and families in general feel comfort, stimulus, joy and respect for all living beings. In addition, dog companionship has been shown to provide other benefits that can improve the quality of life of many more thousands of Alabamians. This publication examines the physical, physiological, and psychological benefits of dog companionship.

**Dogs for the Visually, Hearing & Physically Impaired**

The guide dog for the visually impaired is the most well-known type of companion dog. However, these dogs are legally defined by federal law (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990) as service animals. For example, guide dogs are trained to enhance the mobility and independence of blind men and women.
Working in and outside the house, together with other social activities can now be attained with the aid of these highly trained dogs. The law states that guide dogs are allowed everywhere the general public is allowed, including restaurants, stores, and all places of public accommodation that have a “no pets” policy.

Hearing dogs are trained to help people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. These dogs alert a person with a hearing impairment to various sounds such as a smoke alarm, an alarm clock, the telephone ring, another person, the doorbell, knocks at the door, a baby crying, and sirens.

Service dogs (Figure 2) for the physically disabled are trained to increase the mobility and independence of people who use wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, or canes. These dogs perform such varied tasks as pulling wheelchairs, retrieving items that are dropped, turning light switches off and on, opening and closing doors and drawers, carrying items by mouth or in backpacks, and helping the person rise from sitting or fallen positions. In addition, a number of empirical studies have demonstrated that the presence of a companion dog serves to increase the quantity and quality of attention directed toward the physically handicapped people by both familiar individuals and strangers (National Institutes of Health, 1987). This “magnet” effect of companion dogs can be of great benefit to the handicapped individuals because it reduces the tendency to be avoided or ignored by non-handicapped people.

These dogs can also be of great benefit to people with disabilities associated with arthritis, ataxia (poor balance), multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, and chronic pain. As with guide dogs, most states are allowing service dogs for the physically handicapped full access to public places.

Dogs for the visually, hearing, and physically impaired can be obtained through established organizations or individual trainers. However, the latter may be difficult to locate. Some established organizations in the United States and Canada provide skilled dogs trained at various centers.

Most of their dogs come from their own selective breeding programs that primarily use American Kennel Club (AKC) registered purebred Labrador retrievers and golden retrievers (Figure 3) selected for their excellent temperament, intelligence, and health. However, some organizations successfully use Pembroke Welsh corgis (Figure 4), German shepherds (Figure 5), and

Figure 2. Service dogs for the physically and/or emotionally disabled are trained to increase mobility and independence.

Figure 3. The golden retriever is a favorite dog breed that is used to enhance the lives of people with disabilities and/or living in continuing care facilities. Photo by Jannelle Vreugdehil, Wiki

Figure 4. The Pembroke Welsh Corgi is also an affectionate dog that works well in therapy programs. Photo by Pmuths1956, Wiki
Dog Companionship and its Benefits to Humans

mixed-breeds (dogs that do not possess a known lineage) (Figure 6) from animal shelters.

Figure 5. The German shepherd has been used to aid people with disabilities, in dog-assisted therapy, and for specialized protection. Photo by Ellen Levy Finch, Wiki

Figure 6. Mixed breeds from animal shelters have been used very successfully as hearing dogs.

Dog-Assisted Therapy

Basically, therapy dogs try to normalize the institutional experience by providing emotional support (Figure 7). Although these dogs are not legally defined by federal law, they visit hospitals, nursing homes, schools for mentally retarded children and adults, and other facilities or institutions.

Therapy dogs have been tremendously successful, especially in the areas of physical rehabilitation and psychological recovery. For example, the presence of animals in institutional settings is associated with the tendency of older persons to smile and talk more, reach out toward people and objects, exhibit more alertness and attention, and experience more symptoms of well-being and less depression (National Institutes of Health, 2009). These studies have proven pet programs superior in producing psychosocial benefits compared to some other alternative therapies such as arts and crafts programs, friendly visitor programs, and conventional psychotherapy. Furthermore, the introduction of dogs in visitation programs in children’s hospitals around the country has met with great success. By developing a bond with the dog, the patient may achieve documentable progress toward therapeutic goals and have a very heart-warming and memorable experience. This is true especially for people living in continuing care facilities. After all, sometimes it is nice to have someone to hold and to talk to.

In order for a therapy dog to perform effectively it must have obedience training, a calm and nonaggressive temperament, and good health. To be obedience trained the dog must be able to:

- Walk beside the handler.
- “Sit,” “lay down,” and “stand” on command and “stay” until released from command.
- Come quickly when called and “sit” on the left side of the handler and wait for the next command.

Figure 7. Although therapy dogs are not legally defined by federal law, they are allowed to visit hospitals to provide emotional support. Photo by Zipster969, Wiki
In addition, these dogs must also feel comfortable in the presence of wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, oxygen tanks, food carts, and any other equipment patients and therapists may use.

Although the golden retriever (Figure 3) and the Labrador retriever are among the favorite breeds used in dog-assisted therapy programs, breeds such as the collie (Figure 8), German shepherd (Figure 5), and Pembroke Welsh Corgi (Figure 4) have been used successfully. Unfortunately, not every dog can be a therapy dog.

Figure 8. The collie has been successful in dog-assisted therapy programs. Photo by Sannse, Wiki

National organizations that certify dogs and their handlers include The Delta Society and Therapy Dogs International, Inc. All dogs accepted into Delta Society’s Pet Partners program must pass a two-part screening of skills and aptitude before certification. To be certified by Therapy Dogs International, Inc., dogs and handlers must pass the fairly rigorous Canine Good Citizen Test, sponsored by the American Kennel Club (AKC). Patients and staff should have the option of not participating in dog-assisted therapy.

Other Services and Benefits of Dog Companionship

- A dog may be the solution for victims of abusive spouses or stalkers, especially if a gun is not an option because of children in the home. A dog can be trained to react to threats against the owner and immediate family. The German shepherd (Figure 5) is one of the most popular breeds used for protection.

- A dog can be a benefit in emergencies for those with disabilities associated with seizure disorders. Researchers at the University of Florida reported that some dogs have an innate ability to alert and/or respond to seizures (Dalziel et al., 2003).

- A companion dog, according to medical research, can lower a person’s blood pressure and mitigate the effects of loneliness. The Australian People and Pets Survey of 2006 shows that dog owners, compared to non-pet owners, are more physically active, visit the doctor less often, less likely to take medication for high blood pressure, and are less likely to report feeling lonely. Therefore, those who own dogs can expect health cost savings, both to households and government, in addition to enjoying the companionship of the family pet.

- A dog can enhance self-esteem and feelings of competence in older children, as well as improve motivation, when given the responsibility for its exercise, training, and feeding. This is true especially among those considered at risk. It has also been suggested that exposure to pets should facilitate the establishment and maintenance of relationships with peers, especially in grade and high school (NIH, 1987). Families can spend quality time and share memorable moments by having their youths participate in many dog-related activities that offer safe fun and recreation. Some of these activities include the following:
**Obedience Trials:** Dogs are required to retrieve articles, jump fences, and do heeling patterns. It’s a great way to win titles, and best of all, have wondrous fun with “their” dogs.

**Frisbee Competitions:** Dogs catching a flying disc (commonly called Frisbee) can become a “prize worth working for,” while enjoying the outdoors in a healthy and fun youth-dog adventure.

**Flyball Tournaments:** They consist of a relay type of sport where dogs race over a series of jumps, fetch balls from a ball-box and race back to the start so that the next dog in the relay team continues to run the course.

**Agility Trials:** These types of contests display the dog’s ability to take commands, as to where to go on an obstacle course made up of jumps, tunnels, catwalks, and A-frames. Testing the dog’s ability is a great and healthy way to have fun.

**Dog Care**

Owners must understand that choosing to share their homes and lives with one or more dogs means keeping their end of the bargain. In other words, together with the joy that comes from owning a dog, certain things must be done to secure a happy and healthy animal. Regular veterinary checkups, optimal nutrition and protection against injuries are extremely important.

Additionally, having their male dog neutered or their female dog spayed is not “cruel.” In fact, it is much healthier and beneficial to the dog. For the male dog it means fewer problems with the prostate gland and lower rates of testicular cancer, while for the female dog it means fewer chances of ovarian cancer and uterine infections. Most important, neutering or spaying your dog will contribute to solving the pet overpopulation problem.

Dog-owner education in the areas of health, nutrition, and training is necessary to increase the chance that both dog and owner will remain together for the rest of the natural life of the dog. Tables 1-5 provide additional dog care information.

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**Table 1**

**Facts about Dogs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Mammal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Temperature</td>
<td>100 to 102.5 degrees F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resting Pulse Rate</td>
<td>60 to 140 beats/minute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respiration Rate</td>
<td>10 to 30 breaths/minute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision</td>
<td>Dichromatic (detect two colors, blue and green)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reach Puberty</td>
<td>6 to 9 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Estrous Cycle</td>
<td>8 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Gestation</td>
<td>63 to 65 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaning Time</td>
<td>7 to 8 weeks of age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order</td>
<td>Carnivore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dentition</td>
<td>Temporary teeth erupt at about 20 days of age and a full set of 42 permanent teeth are fully erupted by 6 months of age.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digestive System</td>
<td>Monogastric system</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**

**Dog Vaccination Schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Vaccine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 to 8 Weeks</td>
<td>DHLPPC (Distemper, Hepatitis, Leptospirosis, Parainfluenza, Parvovirus, and Coronavirus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 to 14 Weeks</td>
<td>DHLPPC booster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 to 18 Weeks</td>
<td>DHLPPC booster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 6 Months</td>
<td>Rabies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annually (Adults)</td>
<td>DHLPPC and Rabies (consult your veterinarian for the right vaccination schedule)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3**

**Most Common Parasites in Dogs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Parasite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>Heartworm, Roundworm, Hookworm, Whipworm, Tapeworm, Coccidia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td>Flea, Tick, Mange Mite</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Companion dogs do not remedy all the difficulties posed by a disability. However, they can provide the physical and psychological support needed to move a person towards independence, and somewhat improve their daily life. This includes guiding and alerting people with impaired vision or hearing, retrieving dropped items for the physically challenged, and/or just providing joy and comfort.

Moreover, dog-related activities enable families to spend quality time together, while setting different goals for their four-legged buddies.

Table 6 lists national and state organizations that are dedicated to promoting the physical and emotional well-being of people through mutually beneficial and safe interaction with dogs.

Table 5

**Dog Obedience Exercises**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exercise</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sit and stay</td>
<td>Require the dog to sit in the same spot while you leave or stand six feet away for one minute, then return and release the dog from the stay command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down and stay</td>
<td>Require the dog to lay down and stay in the down position for three minutes and stand six feet away until time is up, then return and release the dog from the stay command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand and stay</td>
<td>Require the dog to stand standing without moving its feet while you circle the dog or leave and stand six feet away, then return the dog to the heel position and release the dog from the stay command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall and finish</td>
<td>Require the dog to sit six feet away from you and make sure the dog comes quickly to you and heel when called</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Guevara (1999)

**Conclusion**

Companion dogs do not remedy all the difficulties posed by a disability. However, they can provide the physical and psychological support needed to move a person towards independence, and somewhat improve their daily life. This includes guiding and alerting people with impaired vision or hearing, retrieving dropped items for the physically challenged, and/or just providing joy and comfort.

More recently, the concept of dogs in healthcare facilities has evolved into dog-assisted therapy programs in which trained dogs help patients achieve documentable progress toward therapeutic goals. These programs have been tremendously successful, especially in the areas of physical rehabilitation and psychological/emotional recovery. Medical research has determined that contact with dogs can lower blood pressure and fend off heart attacks. Increasingly, therefore, the elderly have embraced *Canis familiaris*.

Other benefits companion dogs have been shown to provide are:

- Decreased feelings of anxiety, stress and isolation
- Increased self-esteem, sense of responsibility and competence in older children
- Enhanced respect for all living beings

Table 4

**Guidelines for Selecting Foods and Feeding Dogs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guideline</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make sure the label has the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) guarantee</td>
<td>Make sure the label has the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) guarantee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look for meat (beef, chicken, turkey or lamb) as the first ingredient, rice as the main grain in the formula, and mixed tocopherols (vitamin E) as preservatives</td>
<td>Look for meat (beef, chicken, turkey or lamb) as the first ingredient, rice as the main grain in the formula, and mixed tocopherols (vitamin E) as preservatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be certain that the food has an expiration date, and that it has not turned rancid</td>
<td>Be certain that the food has an expiration date, and that it has not turned rancid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store food in a sealed container in a cool dry place</td>
<td>Store food in a sealed container in a cool dry place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feed the dog according to correct body weight and condition, and consider factors such as growth, adult maintenance, gestation, lactation, level of activity and age</td>
<td>Feed the dog according to correct body weight and condition, and consider factors such as growth, adult maintenance, gestation, lactation, level of activity and age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When changing foods, mix 1/4 of the new food to 3/4 of the old food, and increase gradually to prevent gastric upsets</td>
<td>When changing foods, mix 1/4 of the new food to 3/4 of the old food, and increase gradually to prevent gastric upsets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch the dog's stool, weight, and coat when changing foods</td>
<td>Watch the dog's stool, weight, and coat when changing foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make sure the dog has fresh water at all times</td>
<td>Make sure the dog has fresh water at all times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Guevara (1999)
### National & State Organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Phone Numbers</th>
<th>Website Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Kennel Club</td>
<td>8051 Arco Corporate Drive, Suite 100</td>
<td>(919) 233-9767</td>
<td><a href="http://www.akc.org">www.akc.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birmingham Kennel Club, Inc.</td>
<td>109 Clark Street</td>
<td>(205) 982-7552</td>
<td><a href="http://www.birminghamkc.org">www.birminghamkc.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canine Companions for Independence</td>
<td>P. O. Box 446</td>
<td>1-866-CCI-DOGS (224-3647)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cci.org">www.cci.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birmingham Kennel Club, Inc.</td>
<td>109 Clark Street</td>
<td>1-800-572-BARK (2275)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canine Partners for Life</td>
<td>P.O. Box 170</td>
<td>(610) 869-4902</td>
<td><a href="http://k94life.org">http://k94life.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogs for the Deaf, Inc.</td>
<td>10175 Wheeler Rd</td>
<td>(256) 881-8081</td>
<td><a href="http://www.dogsforthedeaf.org">www.dogsforthedeaf.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog Ears</td>
<td>4200 East Britton Road</td>
<td>1-866-CCI-DOGS (224-3647)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.dogsforthedeaf.org">www.dogsforthedeaf.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fidos For Freedom, Inc.</td>
<td>1200 Sandy Spring Road</td>
<td>1-866-CCI-DOGS (224-3647)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.dogsforthedeaf.org">www.dogsforthedeaf.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guide Dogs of America</td>
<td>13445 Glenoaks Blvd</td>
<td>(818) 362-5834</td>
<td><a href="http://www.guidedogs.com">www.guidedogs.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc.</td>
<td>P. O. Box 15120</td>
<td>(800) 295-4050</td>
<td><a href="http://www.guidedogs.com">www.guidedogs.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding Eyes for the Blind</td>
<td>611 Granite Springs Rd</td>
<td>(978) 422-9064</td>
<td><a href="http://www.guiding-eyes.org">www.guiding-eyes.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Huntsville Humane Society</td>
<td>2812 Johnson Road</td>
<td>(205) 322.5144</td>
<td><a href="http://www.handinpaw.org">www.handinpaw.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humane Society of the Tennessee Valley</td>
<td>R.O. Box 51723</td>
<td>1-865-573-9675</td>
<td><a href="http://humanesocietytennessee.com/">http://humanesocietytennessee.com/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntsville Animal Services</td>
<td>4950 Triana Boulevard South</td>
<td>1-865-573-9675</td>
<td><a href="http://huntsvilleanimalservices.org">http://huntsvilleanimalservices.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>International Association of Assistance Dog Partners</td>
<td>305 Redemption Rock Trail South</td>
<td>1-865-573-9675</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montgomery Humane Society</td>
<td>1150 John Overton Dr</td>
<td>1-865-573-9675</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montgomery Kennel Club</td>
<td>P. O. Box 214362</td>
<td>1-865-573-9675</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEADS/Dogs for Deaf and Disabled Americans</td>
<td>P.O. Box 1100</td>
<td>(978) 422-9064</td>
<td><a href="http://neads.org">http://neads.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Headquarters:</td>
<td>305 Redemption Rock Trail South</td>
<td>1-865-573-9675</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightwinds International Dog Training Specialized Protection</td>
<td>305 Redemption Rock Trail South</td>
<td>(520) 631-6293</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nightwinds.com">www.nightwinds.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Alabama Canine Cruisers Dog Agility Club</td>
<td>305 Redemption Rock Trail South</td>
<td>1-865-573-9675</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North American Dog Agility Council</td>
<td>24605 Dodds Road</td>
<td>(978) 631-6293</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nadac.com">www.nadac.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paws With A Cause</td>
<td>4846 South Division</td>
<td>1-865-573-9675</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco SPCA Hearing Dog Program</td>
<td>2301 Alabama Street</td>
<td>1-865-573-9675</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeastern Guide Dogs, Inc.</td>
<td>4210 77th Street East</td>
<td>1-865-573-9675</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susquehanna Service Dogs</td>
<td>1078 Gravel Hill Road</td>
<td>1-865-573-9675</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapy Animal Assisted Therapy Foundation</td>
<td>P.O. Box 130118</td>
<td>(903) 535-2125</td>
<td><a href="http://www.therapet.com">www.therapet.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapy Partners, Inc.®</td>
<td>3054 Leeman Ferry Rd</td>
<td>Suite J</td>
<td>Huntsville, Alabama 35801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapy Dogs International, Inc.</td>
<td>88 Bartley Road</td>
<td>(973) 252-9800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States Dog Agility Association, Inc.</td>
<td>P.O. Box 850955</td>
<td>972.487.2200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


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Julio E. Correa, PhD, Associate Professor & Extension Animal Scientist, Alabama A&M University

For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county’s name to find the number.

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Revised August 2016; UNP-0008

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