Working Dogs

By Erin R. King

Service dogs are more than just furry friends. These dogs help people!

Like a lot of dogs, Ice likes to go out for walks, meet new people, and sleep on her owner’s bed. But Ice also likes to go to school. She has her own school ID and was even interviewed for the yearbook.

Ice is a service dog. Her job is to go everywhere with Preston, 14, of Georgia. Ice helps him feel safe and get to where he needs to go. Preston has Asperger’s syndrome, which is an autism spectrum disorder. Ice helps Preston deal with crowds, stay focused, and be less anxious.

“The first time I took Ice to school with me, I finally felt like it was safe to be there,” Preston says.

A Dog at Work

When she’s working, Ice wears a pack with patches on it that lets everyone know she is a service dog. The law says service dogs, such as Ice, may go into public places with people. Service dogs are specially trained for their work, and they know how to behave in stores, restaurants, and hospitals.

When Preston and Ice go out, Preston holds one leash and also has another one tied to him in case he drops the main leash. But Ice isn’t going anywhere! She has a job to do, and she always stays by Preston’s side. At school, Ice walks with him from class to class. “With Ice, I can now walk through crowded places and not feel scared that someone will bump into me,” he says.

During class, Preston puts a blanket under his desk for Ice to lie on. It might not look as if she is doing anything. But Ice is aware of everything that is going on. Sometimes she touches him with her paw or puts her head in his lap to get his attention. Ice does that if Preston is not doing his work or is on the computer too long. Preston will then refocus or do what he calls a “mental scan” to see if he is getting anxious. Ice can even sense when Preston is becoming overwhelmed or nervous. She will comfort him by sitting on his lap, licking his face, or letting him pet her. “She knows all my moods,” Preston says.

“My life has been better since she has been here,” Preston adds. “I don’t think I would be able to go to school if she were not here.”

They Train the Dogs

Other students aren’t accompanied to school by dogs, but they meet their dogs there. The relationship between those kids and their pups is a little different. That’s because the students at Green Chimneys School are the teachers.
Four days a week, Dale Picard of East Coast Assistance Dogs brings puppies that are service-dogs-in-training to the school in Brewster, N.Y. The school serves kids who have emotional, behavioral, social, or learning challenges.

In class, the dogs learn how to guide a person in a wheelchair, how to open doors, how to get around obstacles, even how to get laundry out of a clothes dryer.

Mackenzie, 13, has been working with a dog named Garrison for several months. On one recent school day, Mackenzie helped Garrison learn how to flip a light switch. Mackenzie holds a light switch attached to a piece of plywood. “Get the light,” she tells Garrison, as she guides his nose to the switch and shows him how to nudge the switch up. “Yes!” Mackenzie says happily as the light goes on. Then Mackenzie gives Garrison a treat.

Next up is the refrigerator. Garrison takes the rope hanging from the door and holds it in his mouth. “Tug! Tug! Tug!” Mackenzie says. The door opens.

The dogs also learn how to go out in public. “Pretty soon we’ll bring them to the mall,” says Philip, 15. But first, he says, the students will take the puppies to the school cafeteria so they can learn more about being around a lot of people.

**Everyone’s Learning**

The dogs aren’t the only ones learning, though. Picard says that watching the pups learn after a lot of practice also teaches the human students in his class. “The more you practice, the faster you learn it. Then they start seeing that about themselves too,” he says. The students also learn anger management and how to focus, which helps them in many areas of their lives.

Mackenzie agrees. “My dog can be really challenging,” she says. “It helped me feel like even though he frustrates me sometimes, it makes me feel like we accomplished something.”

The student trainers get emotional support from the dogs too. “Say I’m having a bad day,” Mackenzie says. “I know that my puppy’s going to make me happy.”

It’s fun to share a class with puppies and to watch the pups grow up. But for the student trainers, the best part isn’t about helping dogs. As Latif, 14, puts it, “We’re helping people.”

**Meeting a Service Dog**

When you encounter a service dog, you might want to go up and say hi. But service dogs are working dogs, and they are serious about their jobs. It will help if you know a few things.

- Introduce yourself to the person.
- Don’t be offended if the person says it’s not OK to pet the dog. “Many people do not allow their service dog to be petted because it may distract the dog from doing their work, whether the dog is new at this or has been providing service work for
many years,” explains Michelle Cobey of the Delta Society, which works to improve human health through service and therapy animals.

- Don’t ask the person “What’s wrong with you?” A person’s medical information is private. Preston’s mom, Stacy, says she explains to people that the dog helps with Preston’s disability, even though you can’t always see his disability.
- Don’t distract the dog with noises or with food.
- If you have a dog, don’t let your dog approach, play with, or bark at a service dog.

They Help Us!

A lot of animals help people, and many of those animals’ jobs have to do with health. Some of the tasks these animals do might surprise you.

**Horses:** It’s called “hippotherapy,” but it doesn’t have anything to do with hippopotamuses! The word *hippotherapy* comes from the Greek word *hippos*, meaning “horse,” and means “treatment with the help of a horse.” Riding horses can help people improve their balance and strength, and for many people, it also helps their self-confidence.

**Birds:** They’re little, but birds might have a big impact on people. Pet birds, such as canaries, have been shown to help keep older people living in nursing homes from becoming depressed. In one study, people were given a canary or a plant to tend, or nothing. The people who had canaries to take care of reported being the happiest.

**Fish:** Tropical fish can be relaxing to watch. They might also help older people with Alzheimer’s disease — that’s an illness that can make it hard for people to take care of themselves. Having an aquarium to look at during dinnertime helps people with Alzheimer’s disease eat more of their food, researchers discovered.

**Dogs Are Great Listeners!**

Reading aloud helps you be a better reader. Why not read to a dog? A dog doesn’t mind if you don’t say a word correctly, says Deborah Bernstein, director of communications at Green Chimneys School.
1. What is Ice?
   A) Ice is a horse used for hippotherapy.
   B) Ice is a service dog.
   C) Ice is a fish that helps people with Alzheimer’s disease.
   D) Ice is a canary that helps keep people living in nursing homes from becoming depressed.

2. This text is divided into sections with subheadings. What does the author describe in the section with the subheading "A Dog at Work"?
   A) The author describes how Ice helps Preston.
   B) The author describes how Mackenzie trains Garrison.
   C) The author describes fish that help people with Alzheimer’s disease.
   D) The author describes what to do if you encounter a service dog.

3. Reread the section with the subheading "They Train the Dogs."
In this section, the author writes that "the students at Green Chimneys School are the teachers." Why are the students also teachers?
   A) because they are learning anger management and how to focus
   B) because they are teaching puppies how to become service dogs.
   C) because they have emotional, behavioral, social, or learning challenges
   D) because the puppies at the school are taken to the school cafeteria

4. What is the main idea of this text?
   A) The law says that service dogs may go into public places with people.
   B) Kids can learn anger management by training puppies.
   C) Service dogs and other animals help people.
   D) Riding horses can increase people's strength and self-confidence.

5. Read these sentences from the text:
"Ice is a service dog. Her job is to go everywhere with Preston, 14, of Georgia. Ice helps him feel safe and get to where he needs to go. Preston has Asperger’s syndrome, which is an autism spectrum disorder. Ice helps Preston deal with crowds, stay focused, and be less anxious.

'The first time I took Ice to school with me, I finally felt like it was safe to be there,' Preston says."
Why might the author have included this quote from Preston?
   A) to support the information in the paragraph above
   B) to persuade readers to get service dogs of their own
   C) to show that there are disadvantages to owning a service dog
   D) to explain why training service dogs takes so long
6. Read this sentence from the text:
"Pet birds, such as canaries, have been shown to help keep older people living in nursing homes from becoming depressed."

What word could replace "such as" without changing the sentence's meaning?

A) next
B) soon
C) yet
D) like

7. One thing dogs learn at Green Chimneys School is how to guide a person in a wheelchair. What is something else that dogs learn at Green Chimneys School?

8. What do the human students at Green Chimneys School learn?
Include at least two pieces of information from the text in your answer.

9. Read these sentences about Green Chimneys School.
"It’s fun to share a class with puppies and to watch the pups grow up. But for the student trainers, the best part isn’t about helping dogs. As Latif, 14, puts it, 'We’re helping people.'"

Explain how the student trainers are helping people.
Support your answer with evidence from the text.