

**Raising Guide Dogs: An Innovative Supervised Agricultural Experience**

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### ***Raising Guide Dogs: An Innovative Supervised Agricultural Experience***

Training guide dogs does not usually come to mind as a Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE). However, some FFA members are opting to raise guide dogs for Guide Dogs for the Blind (GDB) through their local FFA. This SAE offers many of the benefits of more traditional SAEs, along with opportunities to accomplish community service. The competencies gained from raising a guide dog appear to be positive, but have not been extensively studied.

Humans and animals have always had an inexplicable bond. Dogs have been used as companions, aids in therapy, assistance to those with disabilities, and more. Dogs offer mental health benefits to their owners including less loneliness and improved social network (Barker & Wolen, 2008). This may be because dogs serve as catalysts for social interactions (Viau et al., 2010). Dogs can aid in initiating social interactions as well as “increasing or strengthening social networks and social provisions thus elevating psychological well-being” (McNicholas & Collis, 2000, p. 61).

Children can learn a considerable amount from owning pets including “increased autonomy, self-concept, and self-esteem” (Barker & Wolen, 2008, p. 489). Because pets are completely dependent, children are required “to behave in a mature fashion [and] take responsibility and care for all of the animal’s basic needs. This mature behavior embodies a sense of power in the child and raises his self-worth” (Hamama et al., 2011, p. 1976). In addition, pets increase social orientation in children (Barker & Wolen, 2008). Children often derive emotional support from their pets, talking to them about things going on in their lives (Melson, 2003). The work of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1969) would support the idea that companion animals may provide learning motivation for many children for at least two reasons: (a) children learn more and retain information better when they learn about subjects in which they have an emotional connection, and (b) children learn more and better when learning occurs within meaningful relationships.

In a prison with an animal therapy program, inmates with animals required half of the medication compared with those who did not have animals. In addition, those with animals had fewer violent episodes and suicide attempts than those who did not have animals (Britton & Button, 2005). A dog training program within the prison system reduced the mistrust between inmates and prison staff and decreased the prevalence of behavior infractions among inmates (Britton & Button, 2005). Many of the dogs trained in the prison system go on to be working service dogs for people with disabilities.

The benefits of owning dogs as pets and the benefits of service animals to humans are apparent, but little literature is available regarding the benefits the producers of these service animals receive through the training process. Additional research is needed to formally identify the benefits of raising a guide dog puppy through the FFA program. With this information, FFA Advisors, as well as Guide Dogs for the Blind volunteers, can better articulate the reasoning for joining the puppy raising program.

#### **How it works**

Raising guide dogs is an innovative SAE, providing students the opportunity to gain experiences that may be recorded as exploratory SAEs, unpaid placement SAEs, and community service. Prior to receiving the puppy, students learn about animal care and dog training. This experience can be recorded as a SAE for Small Animal Management. Once the student receives a puppy, it lives with them for the entire 18-month period, accompanying the student to school, church, extracurricular activities, and everywhere in between. The student is responsible for training the puppy in everything from housebreaking to proper public access behaviors. Throughout the 18-month-long program, the student dedicates specific times each day for

training, and incorporates training opportunities into day-to-day activities. Raising a puppy alters students' schedules completely, as it is a 24 hour a day commitment. Additionally, students advocate for, and educate about, the use of working dogs to the general public. Through this program, potential future guide dogs are raised, socialized, and trained before returning to the GDB campuses in California and Oregon where they undergo formal training, and graduate to become working guide dogs for individuals with a visual impairment.

### **Results to date**

Edward Powell is the parent and co-leader of Lone Star Guide Dog Raisers that formed as a part of the Byron Nelson FFA Chapter north of Fort Worth, Texas. According to a podcast broadcasted by the National FFA Organization, Edward's daughter initiated guide dog puppy raising in the Byron Nelson FFA Chapter. She was the first to receive a puppy at Byron Nelson and, as of December 2016, is training her third guide dog. Powell says that the biggest change he has witnessed in his daughter is getting far outside of her comfort zone, which include positions of leadership in Guide Dogs for the Blind and the FFA. He stated that this experience and the confidence built through puppy raising "will greatly prepare her for adult life and success in the job market." Mark Goggins, advisor of the Byron Nelson FFA Chapter, spoke about the students raising guide dogs making significant growth in the areas of animal husbandry, training mechanisms, and educating the public (National FFA Organization, 2016).

Kim O'Byrne, the agricultural science teacher at Mayfield High School in Las Cruces, New Mexico (2016) noted that using guide dogs in her program, "has been one of the best things [she has] been involved with." She added that it is a great opportunity for members who cannot raise livestock but still wish to be involved and gain the same competencies as those with a livestock SAE. In addition, raising guide dogs is community service and allows the students to make a difference. Talking about a visually impaired FFA member, O'Byrne "saw the struggles she faced and overcame [with her guide dog]. [It] allowed her more freedom and independence" (K. O'Byrne, personal communication, January 15, 2016). Seeing the impact of the finished product inspires O'Byrne to continue the puppy raising program

### **Future plans/advice to others**

The FFA chapters that have incorporated guide dogs into their program plan on expanding the numbers of puppies they have at a time. Kim O'Byrne's advice is to contact GDB directly in California or Oregon.

Guide Dog for the Blind's Texas Community Field Representative, Sandi Alsworth, is responsible for creating new puppy raising clubs across the state, including FFA Chapters. Alsworth noted that the number of FFA Chapters wanting to include a puppy raising program in their chapter has been increasing tremendously in the past year. Alsworth works with the FFA Advisors to begin the process of creating these puppy raising clubs.

Student raisers should include finances, journal hours, and community service in their AET record books.

### **Costs/resources needed**

Equipment such as kennels, leashes, collars, toys, and food are necessary to implement the guide dog program into an FFA chapter. These resources are typically covered by the student. All expenses are tax deductible. The puppies and veterinary care are provided by Guide Dogs for the Blind. Chapters, including O'Byrne's, often solicit donations to cover startup costs and travel for graduations.

Goggins recommends having a volunteer parent leader in addition to the agricultural science teacher to alleviate some of the responsibilities.

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