

PAW-SITIVE OUTCOMES: AUTISTIC CHILDREN WHO NEED HELP GET A NEW LEASH ON LIFE



It is essential to get trainee dogs familiar with their working environment.

Lu Feiran

Xuan Xuan was diagnosed as autistic not long after his second birthday. He didn't speak, nor respond to other people. His parents learned to cope with his disability.

But when Xuan Xuan was 7, the boy's condition changed dramatically after Harry came to live with the family.

Harry is a 3-year-old black Labrador, trained at the Erxing Shanghai Guide and Assistant Dogs School to aid autistic people.

Harry accompanies Xuan Xuan to his special kindergarten and plays with him after school. Two months after the dog appeared on the scene, Xuan Xuan's mother Jessica Gong saw significant differences in her son.

"We found that our boy was more willing to stay with the dog rather than immersing himself in electronic devices," Gong told Shanghai Daily.

She added that her son also shows less "self-stimulation behavior," such as repeatedly hitting his forehead with

his palm. She said she thinks that playing with Harry allows Xuan Xuan to release pent-up energy and emotion in less harmful ways.

Harry is one of four autism assistance dogs that graduated from Erxing school, which hosted China's first attempt to train dogs to aid autistic people. For more than two decades, similar programs have been developing in the West.

Autism service dogs are acknowledged globally as a means of providing autistic children with stability and comfort that helps them cope better with the daunting world that surrounds them.

The school started its autism assistance dog training program in 2021. The first graduating class from a course designed to last 18-24 months was delayed by the coronavirus epidemic.

Shanghai Daily visited Erxing's training base in Minhang District last week, where a new group of canine recruits are in training.

"Training these dogs is similar to the training of seeing-eye dogs but with different requirements," said Wang Chunsun, founder of Erxing and dog-training specialist who returned from Canada nearly two decades ago.

