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Wang Chunsun

Founder of Erxing Shanghai Guide and Assistant Dogs School

“For instance, autism assistance dogs are usually required to be stronger than guide dogs,” he said. “One of their tasks is to sense when a child attached to them may be about to roam away, and then to lay down to stop them. That requires strength.”

A mother who identified herself only as Shuya told Shanghai Daily that the dog’s skill in stopping her autistic son from wandering off was really helpful.

“Harley, a 2-year-old Labrador, goes almost everywhere with us — to school, for a walk in the city, to the park,” she said. “We find our son Xiao Ye is becoming more stable with each passing day. He trusts Harley and often says, ‘I have my dad, my brother and my Harley at home.’”

Apart from stopping children from roaming away, the dogs are trained to soothe autistic children if they become upset. The dogs comfort their young charges with their paws or chin on a child’s thigh.

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In addition, the school trains the dogs to remain calm when, for example, the children may uncontrollably play with their food or do jerky movements that might upset a dog.

After a dog graduates, the school invites a “matching family” to come to Shanghai to train and bond with the dog.

Gong and her husband, who come from the eastern coastal province of Shandong, learned about the program from an

online video.

When they went to the school in Shanghai, they were taught about 30 orders in English that they could use to interact with Harry. Under the guidance of school staff, the family also visited various sites, such as Metro stations and shopping malls, with Harry to accustom the dog to his working environment.

“We’re grateful that Harry and Xuan Xuan bonded so quickly,” Gong said.

In 2023, the number of people with autism in China reached 13 million, including over 3 million children.

Wang said the program has been swamped with applications.

“We held an open day recently for the public, and people drove from all over the country to look at the program,” he said.

Using an autism assistance dog is more challenging than guide dogs because people with autistic disorders can’t care for themselves and need family support.

Wang cited the case of a family that eventually had to give up an assistance dog.

The parents and a grandmother were working two jobs in order to financially support care and treatment for an autistic child named Lu Lu. When the dog arrived at their home, the grandmother had to quit one of the two jobs to stay with her granddaughter and the dog, which caused economic hardships that the family decided they couldn’t bear.

“The sad case makes us think about what we can do to help families in similar circumstances,” Wang said. “And that requires support from the society, too.”



An autism assistance dog has brought comfort to 7-year-old Xuan Xuan from Shandong Province.



Before taking assistance dogs home, families need to spend 10 days with the dogs for joint training to bond with them. — Photos/Ti Gong