

What a difference a dog makes!

Training dogs to understand and respond to the needs of autistic people is exactly what the charity Dogs for Autism does. **Elizabeth Denholm** learns more.

DID YOU KNOW?

Dogs can be trained to 'find the exit' to lead their autistic partner out of a shop should they become overwhelmed or anxious.



As long as Coco is with him, Peter is happy to go out with the family now.

Autism impacts on people in different ways, but problems with social interaction and communication can lead to isolation and depression. Dogs for Autism trains and provides autism assistance dogs with ongoing support free of charge, to help autistic people achieve independence, improve their mental health and self-esteem, and enable parents and children to enjoy family life once more.

Fourteen-year-old Peter Wilson has autism and lives in Coventry with his family: dad Rob, mum Angela, and younger brother Max, plus his assistance dog Coco, a Cavapoo. Angela explained how the arrival of Coco changed their lives.

Q When was Peter diagnosed with autism?

A "He was diagnosed when he was very young. He wasn't walking at two and the health visitor kept saying it was just a delay in his learning. But then he wasn't sitting or holding himself upright. We started pushing to get a diagnosis, but we didn't find out he had autism until he was five. It was a traumatic three years."

Q What are the symptoms of Peter's autism?

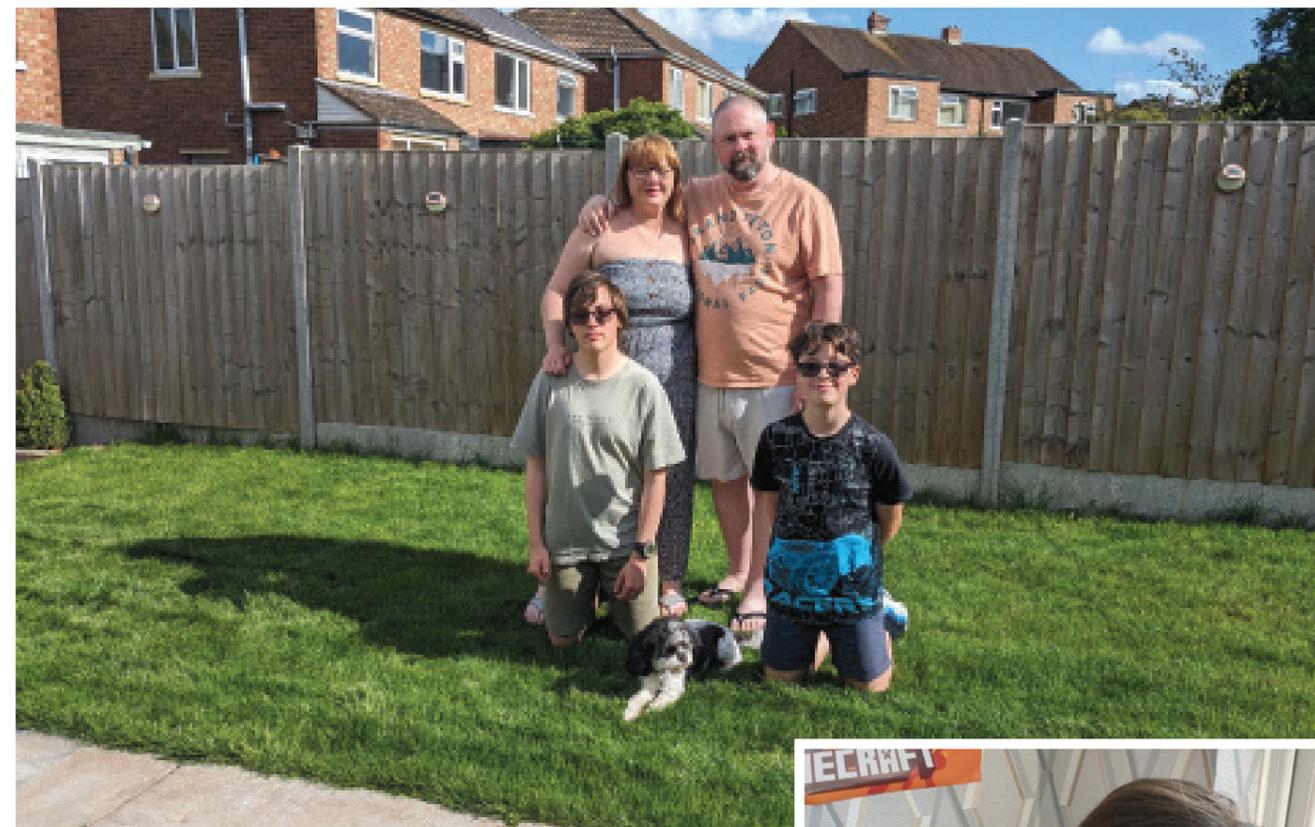
A "Peter couldn't go into crowded places because he would headbutt floors or walls. "We had a horrid experience in town one day. Peter decided he didn't want to be there so he lay on the ground kicking, punching, and headbutting. An elderly couple stood next to me and said: 'Why would you want to bring your children out if they can't behave themselves?' It was so difficult.

"He also went through a phase where he would eat everything in sight. He didn't know when he was full so we had locks on cupboards and the fridge.

"Peter doesn't show emotion. When I say: 'I love you', in 14 years he's only said it back once."

Q Have you had dogs before?

A "No, this is our first dog ever. I had to wear my husband down as he's not an animal person, plus, he



"Coco's made a massive difference to our lives. She's allowed us to be a family again — to be together and not segregated."

Above: Peter with his family: dad Rob, mum Angela, younger brother Max, and Coco.

Right: Peter and Coco chill out at home.

couldn't see the benefit or how a dog would help Peter. It took me about four months but finally he agreed."

Q How did you hear about Dogs for Autism?

A "It was through a friend of a friend. We contacted them and went to Dogs for Autism in Manchester for a day, to learn all about the organisation and the dogs. They let you know what you're in for with the training and we said we were interested, but there's no guarantee you'll get a dog.

"Dogs for Autism came to do a home visit and brought two Labradors. It was quite surreal because I'd just been diagnosed with bowel cancer the day before the visit (I'm now in remission). I was also concerned to see how Peter would react to Labradors as he'd never bothered to interact with dogs before. But he was brilliant; he got stuck in and went out into the garden and we didn't see him for 20 minutes."

DID YOU KNOW?

Dogs can alert to a change in their autistic partner's emotional state, helping to prevent an escalation.

Q When did you find out you were getting Coco?

A "We got through the application process and were told the wait for a dog could be up to two years. But we were quite lucky because soon after, in October 2020, they contacted us and said they'd had



a litter and allocated one of the dogs to Peter.

"We had requested a smaller dog because Peter needed the benefit of cuddles so a Cavapoo is the perfect size. We met Coco for the first time after Christmas and then she was allocated a trainer in Coventry, which was great because we saw her several



“If Coco hears Peter is upset, she will automatically jump on his lap and the change is instantaneous.”

Above: Having Coco on his lap helps Peter to achieve more.

Above inset: Coco settles down quietly while Peter is at school.

times a week and Peter could get accustomed to the trainer and Coco.

“When Coco was 18 months old we had her to stay for a week, and that’s when her trainer, Phillipa, said it was time for Coco to come to us permanently. Peter was so thrilled when she arrived.”

Q Was Coco trained in specific skills to help Peter?

A “When Peter has a meltdown he starts crying hysterically and nothing will stop him. Even now, at 14, if something upsets him, such as a loud noise, he cries.

“I had a video of Peter having a meltdown, which I sent to Phillipa. She trained Coco to jump up on Peter’s lap when she hears him cry. Then, when Coco came to live with us, a trainer came to the house to carry on the training with Coco and Peter.

“If Coco hears Peter is upset, she will automatically jump on his lap and the change is instantaneous. Peter will also encourage Coco onto his lap when he feels overwhelmed.”

Q What other skills has Coco got?

A “When you let go of her lead, or when she no longer feels any tension on the lead, Coco is trained to immediately drop flat in case Peter has dropped the lead.

“Coco is also trained to sit automatically at the side of the road. Peter has no road sense or awareness of traffic, so if she stops so will he. Coco is helping Peter with that and he’s more conscious of roads now.”

Q Does Coco have free time?

A “At home she’s a pet and can relax. We go for walks and throw the ball for her. And we had a family holiday where she loved going to the beach.

“When she’s working she gets a break every couple of hours when we take her jacket off and she can run around. Then, after 20 minutes, she goes back to work.”

Q How difficult was it to get Coco accepted as an assistance dog in school?

A “We had to go through a lot of red tape and risk assessments. Peter had to answer questions about Coco from the headmaster, in front of all the pupils. He was able to do it but only because he had Coco with him. He wouldn’t have been able to do that before Coco.

“Peter is in mainstream school and Coco started at the school part-time last April.”

Q How is Coco safeguarded at school?

A “Coco has her own crate in a quiet area so she has a place for down time. The school has also allocated a toileting area for Coco. All the children have been great with her.”

Q Who supervises Coco?

A “Peter is completing his young handler’s award so he will be able to have Coco without his trainer or an adult with him. He is coping so well. Carrie, the trainer, has started leaving him in the class alone (with the teacher present) and he can do a whole hour on his own in the class with Coco.”

Q How has Peter changed at school?

A “Before, Peter would sit at the back of class and not interact. And, he would have a meltdown over something simple, such as losing his pencil sharpener, when he would be inconsolable.

“But now he’s completely different. Recently he had to give a speech in his English class and Coco was in the classroom with him, so he was able to do the speech with ease. Without Coco he wouldn’t have been able to do it. When we went to parents’ evening every teacher commented on the difference in Peter.

“There was an incident recently at school where Peter was accidentally locked into a changing room. Carrie had just arrived with Coco so she went straight to Peter who was having a meltdown and couldn’t regulate himself. Coco jumped on his lap and Carrie said the transformation was instantaneous. He went from hysterical crying to ‘I’ve got my dog, I’m ok.’”

Q How has Coco changed family life?

A “We couldn’t really go out for family meals before. Peter would be clock watching, constantly asking when



Above: Wildlife TV presenter, conservationist, and patron of Dogs for Autism Chris Packham with one of the charity’s trainees.

Above right: Watching the world go by is all part of the training for assistance dogs.

Right: Dogs for Autism puppies and volunteer puppy parents out training. From left to right: Jill and Oscar, Glenis and Buzzy, and Maureen and Dubber.

Below left: Assistance dogs like Casper need to be able to ignore interesting smells in shops.

Below right: They also need to learn how to relax in busy shopping centres, and to be comfortable around novel objects.

“When she’s working she gets a break every couple of hours...”

he could go home, and no one could relax. Now we can go out to socialise and enjoy ourselves, and Peter is happy because Coco is with him.

“Peter, together with Coco, will also go into shops with us now rather than stay in the car.”

Q What difference has Coco made to your lives?

A “She’s made a massive difference to our lives. She’s allowed us to be a family again — to be together and not segregated. One person doesn’t have to stay at home with Peter because he doesn’t want to do something. And we were able to have a proper family holiday, which was amazing; we did everything together.”



DID YOU KNOW?

Dogs for Autism has 19 dogs in the UK living with an autistic partner, and another 16 pups in training.

It costs £25,000 to train and look after a dog throughout his or her working life.

MORE INFO

For more information, visit www.dogsforautism.org.uk