

## Service dogs that sniff out seizures improve kids' lives

May 20 2015, by Sue Manning

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In this Wednesday, May 13, 2015 photo, Alyssa Howes, 11, walks down the steps at her family's Lakewood, Calif., home with her grandmother Cindy May and her service dog, Flint. Alyssa is blind and has seizures. Flint gives Alyssa a more normal life by alerting her family to the seizures, guiding her so she doesn't fall and allowing her to enjoy a bit more freedom. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)

When Alyssa Howes was 4, she lost her sight and started having

seizures—up to 20 a day.

For years, her grandmother stayed in the girl's room at night, watching for an attack. That ended three years ago when Alyssa got a rare gift for a young [child](#): a service dog named Flint.

When the [golden retriever](#) moved in, life changed for Alyssa's Los Angeles-area family. He gives the 11-year-old a more normal life by alerting her family to [seizures](#), guiding her so she doesn't fall and allowing her to have a bit more freedom.

"It gives her a companion to enjoy the moments when she is doing things she likes to do," said her mother, Juliette Palomaki. "And if she is having a bad day, she will call him and they will just be together."

But not enough dogs are being trained for children with epilepsy, autism and other disabilities, said Karen Shirk, founder of 4 Paws for Ability, a nonprofit that breeds and trains service dogs. Other agencies train dogs specifically to help people with seizures, but Ohio-based 4 Paws is one of just a few that does not exclude young children.

Most require a minor to be 16 so they can handle the dog alone in public. Because a younger child cannot do that, 4 Paws trains at least two adult caregivers, such as parents, teachers and baby-sitters.

Service dogs allow children to feel comfortable at the park, school and restaurants. In Alyssa's case, it means no one has to stand guard at night in case of seizures.



In this Wednesday, May 13, 2015 photo, Alyssa Howes, 11, center, and her service dog, Flint, pose for a photo with her family at their Lakewood, Calif. Home. Alyssa, whose leukemia is in remission, is blind and suffers from seizures. From left to right: parents Juliette and Scott Palomaki; sister, Sawyer Palomaki, 5; and grandmother Cindy May, with Flint. Three years ago, 4 Paws for Ability trained the service dog for Alyssa. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)

"Once we got Flint, she said she wanted to start sleeping on her own with him," Palomaki said.



In this Wednesday, May 13, 2015 photo, 11-year-old Alyssa Howes and her service dog, Flint, pose for a photo at her home in Lakewood, Calif. Alyssa was diagnosed with leukemia at 3, went blind at 4 and started having seizures. Three years ago, 4 Paws for Ability trained Flint for Alyssa, whose leukemia is in remission. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)

Animal behaviorist Brandon McMillan, the star of "Lucky Dog" on CBS, says it's very easy for a child with disabilities to become a recluse.

"Life shouldn't be so complicated at 5," said McMillan, a spokesman for Magnolia Paws for Compassion, which raises awareness that kids can get service dogs. "Take a child who has a condition. Give them a dog. The dog opens up a world for this child. It's important for a child's life."

Seizure dogs are costly—taking 4 Paws \$22,000 to breed and train, with each family asked to raise \$15,000—but they can alert their companions

to seizures before they strike.

Scientists say pooches smell a chemical change when a person is about to seize—they just don't agree how dogs do it, Shirk said. At her training center, [dogs](#) learn to bark to signal a seizure so an adult can give the child medicine.

For Shirk, who has a service dog, Piper, to help her with her muscular dystrophy, getting that warning allows her to take medicine that keeps her breathing.



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"Messages don't get through from the brain to the muscles," Shirk said of a seizure. "Without Piper, I barely have time to call 911 before everything shuts down."

In Alyssa's case, if Flint detects a seizure, he will lick her, become very attentive, lie on her and bark, the girl's mother said.

"When we hear him bark, we know something is up because he doesn't bark for any other reason," Palomaki said.

Alyssa also has leukemia that's in remission and lacks full use of her right hand. Doctors won't give a prognosis because they "don't want to put expectations or limitations on her," Palomaki said.

"She walks, talks and can read the whole Braille alphabet with one good hand. She's a true joy, and they are a dynamic duo," Palomaki said.

**More information:** — [www.4pawsforability.org](http://www.4pawsforability.org) .

— [www.magnoliapawsforcompassion.com](http://www.magnoliapawsforcompassion.com) .

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