
A Client Driven Information Resource for Second Time Guide Dog Applicants

Katherine Ward and Kerry Peirce

A need was identified to enhance the service to clients of Guide Dogs NSW/ACT who were in the transition from their first to their second guide dog. A questionnaire was devised to obtain feedback from clients who had trained with their second dog in the three years ending 30 June 2009. The data were analysed and formed the basis for an audio CD. Topics covered included: the decision to retire your guide dog; grief associated with this decision; where your dog will retire; the unique relationship with your first guide dog; consideration of your second dog's temperament and experience; emphasis on the skills a handler already has; illustration of just how different two dogs can be; changes in vision and the implications on mobility; importance of consistent handling; possibility of displacement behaviours in dogs and management of these behaviours; initially restricting travel routes to allow the second dog to settle in; format of training to suit handler's needs; and changes in teaching styles and training techniques. A script was written incorporating the results of the survey and the audio CD was professionally produced. The CD includes the personal stories of 10 people who share their experience of the transition to their second dog. The CD is available to clients who are about to make the transition.

Introduction

The transition from one guide dog to another has long been acknowledged as a challenging process (Gosling, 2009; Schneider, 2005). Nicholson, Kemp-Wheeler, and Griffiths (1995) extensively examined the grief associated with the loss and the impact on subsequent training following the end of a guide dog partnership. Lloyd, Budge, Stafford, and La Grow (2009) went further in identifying the phenomenon of "Second Dog Syndrome". Second Dog Syndrome relates to the transition from the first to second guide dog as having the greatest impact on guide dog users in

comparison to subsequent transitions. In fact, according to those authors, handlers had inferior relationships with their second dogs. Following this, and based on the experience of instructors at Guide Dogs NSW/ACT, it was believed that there was a need for better support for guide dogs users throughout the transition to the second guide dog. While it has been the practice of Guide Dogs NSW/ACT to prepare clients for this transition throughout the assessment process, it was believed that guide dog users did not necessarily grasp the full emotional and practical implications inherent in the process. Guide dog users who have

undergone this transition in the previous three years were identified and surveyed in a range of areas. This project then, produced a resource for clients to assist in the transition from first to second guide dog based on the feedback obtained in the survey.

The study's aim was to produce a resource package audio format via a CD resource for people making the transition from their first to second guide dog. The content of the resource reflected a combination of guide dog users' feedback obtained from the survey and from instructor experience. By including audio interviews from individuals who recently trained with their second guide dog, it was anticipated that those listening to the CD would make a greater connection with the information it contained. Clients of Guide Dogs NSW/ACT who are contemplating retirement of their first guide dog or who are applying for their second are to be issued with the CD resource.

Methodology

A questionnaire was designed and circulated to professional staff at Guide Dogs NSW/ACT and to a Consultant Bereavement Counsellor for feedback. Participants included 16 Orientation and Mobility (O&M) (Guide Dog) instructors and 53 O&M instructors. Feedback from these groups was incorporated into the final questionnaire.

From the Guide Dogs NSW/ACT database, eligible participants were identified based on the following criteria. Individuals who were: (i) currently working their second guide dog and (ii) trained with a second dog in the three years ending 30 June 2009.

Twenty clients were identified and invited to participate in the study. Seventeen

participated, comprising seven males and 10 females. It was believed that earlier training may not have provided an accurate recollection of the transition and subsequent training experience. The survey was conducted by experienced O&M (Guide Dog) instructors by telephone. Verbal consent was obtained at the time of the interview, written consent was then obtained from all participants prior to inclusion of data. Participants were also given the opportunity to provide additional (qualitative) information about their experiences.

Data were analysed and a draft resource was developed. Feedback was provided by the Consultant Bereavement Counsellor and professional staff at Guide Dogs NSW/ACT. Ten of the 17 guide dog users interviewed were invited to contribute audio interviews for inclusion in the CD resource. Their selection was based on the qualitative feedback given during initial interviews. All 10 participated and all 10 interviews were incorporated in the resource.

The CD resource was professionally recorded and guide dog users' audio contributions were interspersed throughout to further support and enhance the information.

Results and Discussion

Review of the survey response identified a number of issues that respondents found difficult or challenging about the retirement, transition, and subsequent training process. All participants expressed having had either a good or excellent experience with their first guide dog. Participants were asked about the reasons for retiring their first dog. The majority of dogs were retired for age-related

poor health (59%). The remainder had become too slow in their work (41%) and 24% of respondents believed in conjunction with these reasons, that the dog had reached the end of its working life.

Nicholson et al. (1995) asserted that guide dog users believe that the retirement and retraining process had an impact on the progress and subsequent bonding during training with their second guide dog. This assertion is supported by instructor experience. A majority of participants reported being “really sad” (76%) about the decision to retire their first dog. Participants were able to select from a number of feelings, 41% were “resigned”, 41% were “accepting”, and 29% felt “guilty” about the retirement.

Of the participants interviewed, a majority kept the retired guide dog as a pet (65%) and the remainder completed their retirement with family and friends (24%), or were otherwise re-homed (11%). All participants reported being comfortable with the arrangements that had been made for the dogs’ retirement. Guide Dogs NSW/ACT strongly encourages that decision to be made by the guide dog user. Understandably, of those who kept the retired guide dog as a pet, half of the participants reported they had felt guilty about leaving the retired dog at home while out working with their second dog.

The authors, based on their experience as instructors, were aware that guide dog users often delay the decision to retire their guide dog for as long as possible. However, the majority of participants surveyed (82%) were happy with the timing of retirement once the decision had been made. Further,

94% were happy with the timing of training for their second dog.

In an attempt to discover participants’ expectations and insights, questions about training with the second dog were asked (retrospectively). More than half (65%) had different expectations of their second dog in comparison to their first, and 53% found training with their second dog emotionally difficult. However, 59% did not find the technical aspects of training challenging. All participants reported understanding the ways that training with their second dog would impact on their day to day life. Respondents were aware of the initial restrictions in travel and the need to devote time to their young dog.

All those surveyed had worked their first dog for a minimum of four years with the majority working their dogs for 8-10 years. Self-perceived changes in levels of fitness since training with their first guide dog was an issue for about half of the participants (53%). For some participants, their self-perceived fitness had improved as a result of consistently walking with their first dog. A minority of respondents (29%) found training with their second dog more physically demanding and 35% found it required greater concentration.

During the period of time since training with their first guide dog, 59% of participants reported a change in their vision. Of these participants 50% reported that they were less able to visually support their second dog and 80% believed that this had impacted the progress of their training. For many participants this issue meant a change from travelling visually to travelling tactually and highlighted the importance of providing

additional support and training to applicants in this position.

Throughout the questionnaire, participants were given opportunities to provide comments. Following the analysis of the data some unexpected results were obtained. Many participants reported being surprised at just how different the second dog was from the first with regard to its temperament. Participants reported an expectation that the dogs would have greater similarities for example, “after all, the first dog was a Labrador and so is the second”. Other attributes such as size, speed, and gait were mentioned as obvious differences that may not have been anticipated.

This outcome was somewhat unexpected by instructors and highlighted the need to include more detailed dog-specific information to broaden knowledge. Challenges specific to young and inexperienced dogs, temperamental differences and management of displacement behaviours were also highlighted by respondents. While it is recognised that second time guide dog users have valuable dog handling experience, the results highlight the need for handlers to remain flexible to learning new skills and possibly to learning a variety of approaches to accommodate the dog’s sensitivities.

Changes in vision were overwhelmingly reported by respondents, with 80% reporting that the change in vision impacted upon their ability to support the new dog. A more effective way of communicating the potential for challenges during the transition period is integral to successful retraining outcomes.

Instructor experience suggested that people making the transition from the first

to second guide dog did not have a thorough understanding of the retraining process. However, all respondents reported they understood the practical limitations with regard to travel routes and the time required to support the new dog during initial training. These factors supported a conclusion that the transition process is inherently challenging.

CD Resource Development

From results of the questionnaire, instructor experience, and a review of relevant literature, a resource was developed and issued to people either considering retirement of their first guide dog or who had applied for a second dog. Comment from other professionals was sought and feedback was included in the final resource package. This resource took the form of an audio CD and comprises a narrated script interspersed with interviews of 10 guide dog users talking about their experiences. By including the guide dog users, the producer’s aim was to have users speak to users rather than instructors telling users what to expect. This strategy will hopefully connect with the target audience on a more effective and personal level.

Topics covered in the CD include: the decision to retire your guide dog, the grief associated with this decision, where your dog will retire, the unique relationship with your first guide dog, consideration of the second dog’s temperament and experience, emphasis of the skills a handler already has, illustration of just how different two dogs can be, changes in vision and the implications this has on mobility, importance of consistent handling, possibility of displacement behaviours in dogs and management of some of these behaviours, restricting travel

routes initially to allow the second dog to settle in, format of training to suit handler's needs, and changes in teaching styles and training techniques.

Following the production of the CD resource, all eligible clients will be issued with the resource and included in a further study to determine its effectiveness in preparing guide dog users for the challenges faced during the transition period. It is anticipated that the questionnaire will be re-administered in two years' time.

Despite a thorough feedback process prior to commencing the survey, some of the questions did not elicit the type of feedback intended. The questions were misunderstood or answered with multiple answers. Prior to the follow-up survey, the questionnaire will undergo a review process including test questions with the aim of improving the clarity of the questionnaire.

Conclusion

As a result of this study and subsequent production of the CD resource it is anticipated that people undertaking the transition from their first to second guide dog will be better informed of the potential challenges. In addition, recipients of the CD can feel supported by the knowledge that instructors at Guide Dogs NSW/ACT are empathetic to the emotional and practical challenges facing them.

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* First name only provided for privacy reasons

Katherine Ward, B.Sc., M.Spec.Ed., (Sensory Disability), O&M (Guide Dog) Instructor, Guide Dogs NSW/ACT, 2-4 Thomas Street, Chatswood, NSW 2067, Australia; email: <kward@guidedogs.com.au>. Kerry Peirce, Grad.Dip., (Vision Impairment), M.HSc., (Gerontology), O&M (Guide Dog) Instructor, Guide Dogs NSW/ACT, 2-4 Thomas Street, Chatswood, NSW 2067, Australia; email: <kpeirce@guidedogs.com.au>.