K94U2C – It’s GR8 M8!

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The Royal Society for the Blind Guide Dog Service (RSBGDS) provide an annual ‘come and try a guide dog’ weekend camp for young people with vision impairment. The purpose of the camp is to provide participants with a range of guide dog handler-related experiences from which they might consider a guide dog as a mobility aid. The article describes other organisations involved in the camp and activities in which participants engage.

If you do not understand text speak then join the queue behind me. I have quickly learnt that if communication is to occur with young people then one must minimise, abbreviate, and use a mobile phone!

For the ‘uncool people’ the translation K9 4 U 2 C ‘it’s GR8 M8’ is ‘Canine for you to see, it’s great mate.’ So what does this mean? Young people who are blind or vision impaired need to be well informed before they make significant decisions in their lives. This is especially so when making a decision about a mobility aid, particularly if it is a complex decision such as whether or not to use a Royal Society for the Blind (RSB) Guide Dog.

The Royal Society for the Blind Guide Dog Service (RSBGDS) established in 2006, is the most recent guide dog service in South Australia. RSBGDS is a service of the RSB that was established in 1884. RSB has a breeding program, dogs-in-training, and clients using RSB Guide Dogs. The RSBGDS is South Australia’s largest provider of services to more than 11,500 people who are blind or vision impaired.

K94U2C commenced in 2008 and is an annual ‘come and try’ weekend camp where RSBGDS, in conjunction with the organisation ‘CanDo4Kids’ provide young people who are blind or vision impaired the experience of using a guide dog. The program is conducted at the Adelaide Shores Holiday Units in West Beach, Adelaide and is an opportunity for young people to learn about skills and responsibilities needed to work with and care for a RSB guide dog. To date, three camps have included 14 young participants (three to four participants each camp). Participants included seven males and seven females ranging in age from 14 to 17 years.

The organisation ‘CanDo4Kids’ (Townsend House Inc.) is invited to participate in the delivery of the project in partnership with the RSB. CanDo4Kids is the principle provider of charitable services to children who are deaf and blind in South Australia, the lead in charity to the adult services provided by the RSB. CanDo4Kids is able to provide support for recreation and leisure activities during ‘program down time’ and practical assistance in the management of the camp. Potential camp participants are identified using networks in the Education Department, South Australian School for the Vision Impaired (SASVI), and CanDo4Kids.
K94U2C participants are matched with a RSB Training Guide Dog. Participants work one-on-one with RSB Guide Dog Mobility and Orientation and Mobility (O&M) Instructors, and are accommodated in a residential setting. During the camp, participants are not assessed for guide dog mobility and the RSB guide dogs used on the camp are from a general pool of training dogs.

Once having arrived and settled on Friday evening, participants meet their dog and perform tasks such as feeding, toileting, and exercising. In addition, participants learn about myths and facts regarding canine behaviour, social interaction between a human and a dog, some basic commands to establish a bond and a working relationship, and guiding commands, and handler positioning.

On Saturday, initially with close supervision and support, participants perform a number of walks with their guide dog. The first few walks with their guide dog are in and around the accommodation venue. Walks then extend to a long promenade beach walk (Figure 1), a walk through a large shopping centre that includes restaurant training and lunch, and finally on the Saturday night, a walk to a restaurant for dinner. Recreational activities on Saturday evening include a quiz with the aim of improving participants’ knowledge of dogs, canine behaviour, and welfare.

The final walk occurs on Sunday within the grounds of the CanDo4Kids site at Townsend House. Participants complete a semi-solo walk with their dog in and around the secure grounds following a sensory path and bicycle track. Participants and their guide dog work in and around obstacles

Figure 1. Camp participant walking the beach promenade with a training guide dog.
on unfamiliar routes, negotiating and orientating themselves as they go, just as they would in daily life.

The final walk is observed by parents. On completion of the walk parents are given the opportunity to ask questions about guide dog mobility and take part in the end-of-camp celebrations. The camp concludes with a 'look what we have achieved' BBQ. A camp graduation ceremony follows and the opportunity to share weekend experiences. At the completion of each program, questionnaires are circulated to participants and their parents. Responses consistently include praise for the camp and its purpose.

The success of the camp program is evident by several participants from each camp immediately going on to assessment, matching, and training with their own RSB guide dog. Further, many participants decide on guide dog ownership at a later time, and others choose to learn other mobility aids such as the white cane.

K94U2C 2008 was the first program of its kind offered in South Australia and its success has influenced the commencement of a similar program at Guide Dogs UK.

The program received acknowledgement by the International Federation of Guide Dog Schools as one that might influence the increased ownership of guide dogs by young people.

The success of the camp is the result of a number of factors. These factors include: (i) giving young people an opportunity to work with a RSB guide dog for a weekend on a come and try basis (ii) assessing the late stage training dogs in a non-training environment. The dog’s transition from the artificial training world to the real world gives instructors a clearer view of the dogs’ skills before matching with a permanent owner (iii) skilled staff who are confident working with young people (iv) an excellent working relationship between RSB O&M and Guide Dog staff and (v) young people making decisions based on experience and choice as to whether or not RSB guide dog mobility now or in the future would be of benefit to them.

Major benefits of the camps for RSB staff are the opportunities to discuss and improve service standards, re-focus on a client-centred work ethos, and improve skills and initiatives that will assist young people to make informed decisions about RSB guide dog mobility. Such staff collaboration and cohesion benefits all RSB clients by the resulting provision of high quality mobility services.