The NDIA's Research and Evaluation Branch has completed a comprehensive systematic review and meta-analysis of quantitative studies, and meta-aggregation of qualitative studies to understand the benefits of assistance dogs or pets for people with autism.

We have presented these studies in 2 reports:

- Benefits of assistance dogs or pets for people on the autism spectrum: A systematic review and meta-analysis (3.5 MB DOCX)
- Benefits of assistance dogs or pets for people on the autism spectrum: A systematic review and meta-analysis (3.2 MB PDF)
- Lived experiences of assistance dogs for people with autism and their families: A systematic review and meta-aggregation of qualitative studies (208 KB DOCX)
- Lived experiences of assistance dogs for people with autism and their families: A systematic review and meta-aggregation of qualitative studies (461 KB PDF)

We have also produced a combined plain language summary:

- Summary: Investigating the benefits of assistance dogs or pet dogs for people with autism (304 KB DOCX)
- Summary: Investigating the benefits of assistance dogs or pet dogs for people with autism (191 KB PDF)

Assistance dogs are dogs that have been specially trained by an accredited assistance animal provider to assist a person with disability do at least three things they wouldn't be able to do because of their disability.

They are also trained to a high level of obedience to reliably support people with disability when out and about in the community.

What we did

We identified 23 articles that investigated the impacts of assistance dogs or pets for people with autism.

Fifteen of the articles included quantitative data about the benefits of assistance dogs or pets for people with autism.

Ten of the articles included qualitative data about the lived experiences of families of a child with autism who have an assistance dog.

What did we find

From the qualitative studies we found that parents had mixed experiences of assistance animals:

- Parents thought assistance dogs benefitted the child and family, including helping the child socially, with emotional regulation and decreasing stress for the parents. However, these seem to be the same benefits described by parents of children with autism with a pet dog.
- Many parents were not prepared for the practicalities of owning an assistance dog such as the time, energy and dedication required to look after the dog's wellbeing and heath.
- Many parents reported being denied access to public places with the dog because there is a lack of awareness in the community about autism and the role of assistance dogs.

There may be some benefits reported in the quantitative evidence of assistance dogs for people with autism, but we can't be confident in the results because there were only a few studies and mostly of lower level of evidence strength.

For example:

- Small to moderate effects found on measures of autism (those used to diagnose autism such as difficulty with social communication, repetitive or sensory behaviours); adaptive functioning (the skills and abilities for everyday functioning) and family outcomes (such as parental stress/burden).
- There were also small to moderate effects of pet dogs on measures of autism, child mental health, and family outcomes.
- This means the research showed that the benefits of assistance dogs may not exceed those of pet dogs.
- The strongest evidence is from a single randomised controlled trial, which found that parents of children with autism who had an assistance dog for 9 months had significantly decreased parenting stress compared to a waitlist control group.

It is likely that some individuals will respond well to animal-assisted supports.

However, the current evidence does not suggest that assistance dogs are more effective than pets.

These findings will inform the development of guidelines about Assistance Animals and the NDIS.