

## DIABETIC ALERT DOGS

There are many helpful tools available for children, young people and families battling Type 1 diabetes and a Diabetic Alert Dog is one more tool that can be added to the toolbox.

Diabetic Alert Dogs are trained to smell the chemical body changes that occur as the insulin levels increase or drop. When a child is experiencing high or low blood glucose (sugar) level, their body is releasing chemicals that change their typical scent.

*Cherie Davis*, mom to 6 year old Alden who has Type 1 diabetes, shares her personal experience and helpful insight.

“Can I ask you about your dog?” is a question I am asked almost every time we step out the door with my Type 1 diabetic son’s Service Dog. While I never mind answering questions, it’s hard to really give an accurate portrayal of owning a Diabetic Alert Dog (a DAD for short) in the couple of minutes that a stranger is willing to give you. Usually I just get the “How cool!” or “Where can I get one?”, but there’s also those that simply want to know where to get a working dog vest, so they can “...take my pet dog into stores too!” It makes me wish that I could just sit them down and really take the time to explain all the fine details about what a Diabetic Alert Dog is- and is not- and how owning one is not a “one size fits all”; being a DAD owner/handler is not for everyone, but for those of us that do have a successful working team, it can be a life saver.

Let me start off by saying that we never planned on owning a DAD. Our son, Alden, was in DKA and diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at only 10 months of age. He was put onto an insulin pump at diagnosis, and then got a Continuous Glucose Monitor (CGM) when he turned 16 months old. While by no means did we ever think we had Alden’s diabetes “under control”, we did settle in to a routine and life got back to a new normal. Now as for our DAD, “Senka” (her name means ‘shadow’), she is a full-blooded Border Collie that is actually a shelter dog! No, she did not come from any organization or trainer, but rather she was formerly a rescue dog that nobody wanted. We actually adopted Senka with the intention of her becoming ‘my’ dog to follow me around as I did my chores on our horse ranch. However, Senka had other plans... from the very first day when we brought her home she bonded right away with Alden. We started to notice that Senka would sometimes get “agitated” at times out of the blue; she’d leave Alden, come running up to me and “nudge” at my thigh, then she’d head back to Alden. If I ignored her, she’d get almost- what we thought was- annoying! She’d put her head under your arm and give you a nudge... repeatedly!! But it all finally started to make sense, when about 15 minutes later Alden’s CGM would go off with a warning. And then it \*finally\* started to “click” with us that somehow Senka

was picking up on Alden's blood glucose (bg) levels! We then started keeping track of the "nudging" (alerting) and comparing it to Alden's CGM- and she was dead on! In fact, there were many times she was even MORE accurate than the CGM (which can drift or go into confused "???" mode)... and she was always AHEAD of the CGM- which is a *major* benefit, as the Dexcom actually has a 15 min. lag behind the bg. After talking with a trainer friend of mine, we found out that Senka is a 'Natural Alerter'... somewhat rare, but not unheard of. We then started training her for Public Access and Canine Good Citizen (CGC) certification, which took a lot of time, work and consistency. Once Senka passed all her CGC requirements and we KNEW she was therefore qualified to be out in public and had DAD potential, we then started working on "Scent Training" to narrow down her bg target ranges and assign a clear alert. I won't go into all the details, as not everyone wants to train their own Service Dog, and many prefer to use a DAD company. But, suffice it to say, that the training is pretty straight forward and simple, and there's lots of information, books, videos and courses online about training your own DAD if you search for it-- BUT no matter what, it does require a high level of commitment and dedication.

Senka is an absolute blessing and we are WELL aware of that. She has literally saved Alden's life several times. We love her and treat her like she's "one of the family", and she- being a Border Collie- is as smart as a whip and *loves* her job as Alden's DAD. While she is now a registered Service Dog and fully trained, people may be surprised to learn that we do NOT take her with us all the time! While she obviously IS allowed to accompany Alden anywhere (via the Americans with Disabilities Act), there are times that Alden just wants to be "one of the kids". Here's the thing, when you have Type 1, it is basically an "invisible disease" for the most part. People rarely even realize there's something "wrong" with your child... it's not like the child is in a wheelchair or has an obvious deformity, they simply blend in with the crowd. If you have a DAD you can NEVER just go out in public unnoticed! For example, when we go to Wal-Mart, you get stared at by every person you pass, you have to fend off the "would be petters" (who still try and pet Senka despite her patches asking them not to, as it can distract her from her job), you get the questions, the comments- both good and bad... the "I cannot believe they let a \*dog\* in here!" type of people, the ones who question if your dog really *is* a Service Dog, because they don't see your child's need for one, and those that then want to tell you horror stories about their relatives "...who had diabetes and had their legs amputated!"—all in front of your Type 1 child. If by chance your child is a little shy or doesn't like added attention, then owning a DAD could be one of the worst things you could do! Before you go anywhere, you have to constantly make sure where you're going will work out for bringing a dog (ie: will there be a place for her to go potty outside?, will the pavement be too hot or have ice

melt/salt?- if so, you need to put her booties on to protect her paws., will you be doing things that Senka can't do (like riding the sky ride at the zoo, or a roller coaster, or just a really crowded place where she'd get stepped on). It's sort of like taking a baby with you again- one that never grows up, and a lot of EXTRA work... you have to pack water, bowls, food, poop pick-up bags, her boots, leash, vest, mat to lay on (you teach a dog to "place"- so like when at a restaurant they know to go under the table, and you use a mat so the dog doesn't lay in old spilled ketchup or sticky soda at a movie theatre). And, in my case, when we got Senka, Alden was only 4yrs old-- way too young to be trusted with walking a dog by himself, so that responsibility then fell on me. What we did was had a short looped leash (called a "city leash") attached to her collar for him to hold, and I then had a tethered longer leash (has a carabineer attached to both ends) clipped onto my belt at my waist. Senka then walked between the two of us, and it left my hands free to push the shopping cart/get groceries off the shelf. We worked it out, and Senka has now learned to walk beautifully with Alden. I still do not trust HIM to fully walk her out in traffic or by himself in public, because often (being just 5) he will get distracted (like in the toy aisle) and just \*drop the leash\*... Senka won't go anywhere, and she just follows and sits/lays down wherever he is, BUT this is a MAJOR violation of the ADA laws. A Service Dog must be leashed and in total control at all times, so if we were caught, we could be kicked out of the facility... thus why I just keep her secured with my secondary back-up leash.

I don't want to be "Debbie Downer" to anyone considering getting a dog, but I do like to always be 100% honest and upfront about the WHOLE picture of owning a DAD. They are WONDERFUL, and I'd never trade Senka for a million bucks... but, she *is* a lot of work. You see, what many do not realize, is that the training NEVER ends. It is a 24/7 and 365 day a year job owning a DAD. If you do get "lazy", well, then eventually the dog will follow suit... it will stop alerting, it will test you, it will start picking up bad habits, and it ultimately will just turn into a "pet". One other thing to consider is that a DAD is NOT a machine, and many people erroneously hope to get a dog so they can get some rest and not have to worry about "night checks" anymore. This is just not the case—you will get *less* sleep! Some DAD's *never* are dependable for night alerting (and many companies won't even guarantee their dogs will do so), and those that do alert may catch the lows, but then will have you up every 30 min. or more until back in range. Dogs can get sick (nose stuffed up), have a "bad day", and they need their rest too. Sometimes they \*may\* give you a night alert- and others, they may be sleeping so soundly/deeply (especially if they've had a busy day), that they too miss the low bg. If people can sleep through alarm clocks or beeping CGM's sometimes, why then do they think that a dog will not do the same thing? As for Senka, she's caught several nighttime lows- but NOT all... she only has ever rarely missed one during the day (and

yes, it too can happen), but we do not rely on her for night time. When it comes right down to it, we would NEVER give up our Dexcom CGM-- even with a DAD. I just view them BOTH as tools. While Senka is ahead of our Dexcom in alerting-- and she never goes into the confused "???" mode or drifts like a CGM can-- she does NOT give us "trending arrows", so we know if his blood glucose is still dropping, coming up or staying steady; Senka does not give us downloadable data to analyze for making pump adjustments, like the Dexcom does; the Dexcom does not "stand out" in a crowd, like a DAD on a leash besides you does; the Dexcom does not have to be fed twice a day, walked/exercised and taken out to go potty multiple times a day- rain, snow or sun, and the Dexcom is far more reliable for monitoring Alden during the night. IMO, if a person asks for my honest opinion, unless they have some adhesive/allergy issue which makes wearing a CGM an impossibility, given the \*choice\* between the two, I would tell them to get a CGM \*first\*- use that, and see then if you still want a DAD and all the work that comes with it... getting a DAD is a lifetime commitment for that animal and you.

My goal is never to dissuade or discourage people about getting a DAD, because Senka really is a joy; she fills an emotional need for companionship and acceptance with my son, as well as been a great way for him to meet people, talk about T1 and assume responsibility for her care and wellbeing. But what I do try to do, is educate people without all the "cuteness factor of a puppy" or "rose colored glasses" on, and make sure they \*really\* know what they are getting into when acquiring a DAD. Having a Service Dog is vastly different than owning a "family pet", and they cannot be treated as such. There never is a "day off" from training, from reinforcing behaviors, for giving commands and responding to alerts. That being said, you also need to give your DAD some "down time" daily too to play and relax, or they can easily get burned-out, as you would too, if you had to endlessly do a job without rest. There also is a huge financial aspect to it... and not just the initial cost of acquiring a DAD (especially if you purchase one from an organization), but with a Service Dog you need to buy a vest, ID tags or patches, seasonal boots (warmer for the snow/salt, and cooler for the hot asphalt in the summer), rain gear (nobody wants to smell a wet dog in their facility), bedding, travel crates/seatbelts (your dog needs to be safe and secure in a vehicle, just like your child... and this then takes up a *lot* of room in your vehicle), regular vaccinations, monthly heartworm medicine, flea/tick prevention medication, and grooming supplies. DAD's must be bathed weekly (they must always be clean when out in public), brushed daily, their teeth need to be brushed/scaled, and their toenails trimmed regularly (to prevent damage to flooring and fit comfortably into the boots). There are also unexpected vet bills, and there is no guarantee that this dog you are acquiring may not come down with some ailment/injury or genetic deformity that may

cut its DAD career or lifespan. With all that being said, one final word of advice for those who are ready to commit to owning a DAD, if you are planning to purchase one from an organization, before you jump into anything, do your research. Thoroughly check out reviews from others, examine the contract before you commit, ask questions and find out exactly how much training the dog has had before you will be acquiring it. Owning a DAD is life changing, but if you know what you are getting into from the get-go, it can also be a source of comfort and security for managing your Type 1 child's diabetes.

As I tuck Alden into bed every night, Senka hops up and spoons in right beside him, with her paw resting across his waist- guarding him, monitoring him, and comforting him, all through the night. Alden shares a bunk bed with his younger brother, who slowly climbs up the ladder to the top bunk. We initially gave Alden the option of which bed he wanted, as he was the older brother, but for him it was an easy choice. His brow furrowed, and he shook his head and said, "Momma, you know Senka can't go up there! I'll sleep down here. That's what friends do, right? They stick together... and we are stuck like glue!" And it is times like this, that you realize all the time and work of owning a DAD is well worth it.

