

What's it like giving your child a BFF?

By Carol Burke, William's mother

April 2011. William Burke is an awesome kid who has Down syndrome. His new best friend is Pumpkin, a Multi-purpose Service dog trained by 4 Paws For Ability, Inc. Before we begin his story, here's a brief message from William.



Hi, I'm William. They tell me I have Down syndrome. It should have been called UP syndrome since I'm usually pretty happy and full of energy (even when I'm asleep). Sometimes I can get myself in dangerous situations like when I run into the street or take off without telling my parents. I'm really good at climbing fences, too. I need a service dog to help me be safe. Thank you for helping my new 4 Paws best friend, Pumpkin, come home to me!

What's it like giving your child a BFF? What difference does it make to the rest of the family? And, what have we learned from William's BFF?

When a child has special abilities, life tends to revolve around the needs of that child. For some kids that may mean therapy both at home and at a therapy facility (for us, that's Cincinnati Children's hospital) - speech and OT. Various medical appointments - William sees his pediatrician (Dr. Debbie, who we love), ENT, & Endocrinology. We're lucky that William has limited medical involvement.

Kids with special abilities often have difficulties making and keeping friends for whatever reason. Parents may shy away from going to someone else's home since that home may have breakables and may not be special kid-proof.

For us that may mean our friend's home is on a main street or lacks door/window alarms. People, especially kids, love to come up to Pumpkin and ask (ok, most of the time they ask) if they can pet her.

We defer the question to William since she is his best friend. It gives us a chance to talk about service dogs and their many abilities and how she serves William.

Here's how Pumpkin joined the family: William got an email in late November from Pumpkin:

Tuesday, November 23, 2010

Dear William:

Hello! My name is Pumpkin nut...not like the Great Pumpkin or anything like that! I am a member of the Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream litter and there is one flavor called Pumpkin. My sister Kiwi and my brother Dublin are also in this class. How cool is that?



I like to play ball, do you? Do you really live in Cincinnati? Does that mean we can visit 4 Paws? That is awesome! I will miss everyone here but I have been dreaming of you for a whole year. My own boy to play ball and Frisbee with!

My birthday is 11-1-2010 [born 11-1-2009] and I am a Labrador Retriever. I can't wait for you to come here. I will be counting down the days!

xoxo Pumpkin

(PS. I hope you do not mind if I am a girl)

Since Pumpkin has entered our lives things have changed - for the better. In just the month since we've been home from training we've been able to go places that were not possible before Pumpkin.

Our stress level has decreased tremendously. When we are out in public, William holds a short leash (one foot) and is tethered to Pumpkin. Pumpkin is very good at keeping track of "her boy." If he stops, she will let us (the handler know). If he tries to take off, Pumpkin just keeps encouraging him to stay with her.

Pumpkin has already shown us that she can track William when he decides to "escape" either indoors or outdoors. For her, it's a game! For William, his best friend has found him! For us, she's a lifesaver!

William is also learning responsibility. William is the one to let Pumpkin in and out (fenced back yard) to "go potty." He feeds her and gives her water. William assists in daily grooming. He practices commands with her. It is amazing to see the bond that is developing between these best friends forever.



Monday, January 24, 2011

A Special Angel

Nine years ago yesterday a special angel was born. His name is William. And no, I wasn't there when he was born so I can't swap labor and delivery stories. But if you want, I can tell you about a phone call we got a few months down the road asking if this little baby could become part of our family at another time.

Today, there's no time to focus on William's birthday since he's been scheduled for surgery on Wednesday. This will be William's third medical procedure since the fall (and I hope the last for a while).



William routinely wakes up during the night. And we've gotten all kinds of advice on how to handle this. But sometimes your guts instinct tells you differently.

Last week William had a sleep study and the results would be shared in about two weeks. Friday evening when we received the call from the ENT's nurse, we knew something was amiss.

William has severe sleep apnea and needs surgery as soon as possible like next Wednesday.

His body wakes him up during the night so he can breathe.

So now we prepare the best we can - the 'to do' list is long and we pray. Pray William doesn't sense our tension. He's very good at reading people. Pray surgery goes well and he has a speedy recovery. Pray this resolves the sleep apnea.

Wednesday, we will take our special angel and entrust him to God's angels to keep watch over him and we will pray.

Surgery: Wednesday, January 26, 2011

Our experience is that surgeries usually start later than scheduled. When we got back to the room where you get ready for surgery, we were told William surgery was scheduled to being 20 minutes earlier than originally scheduled. Less time to think....

Pumpkin was a tremendous help. She helped calm all of us and provided a diversion for William. She walked her boy to the induction room and stayed with him until he fell asleep. Not sure she wanted to leave him.

Who did William ask for first thing in recovery?
Pumpkin! He kept thumping his arm signing her name.



Pumpkin got up on his bed with a little assist from Ed (too high for her to jump) and gave her boy kisses. William ate popsicles. Pumpkin ate ice.

William and Pumpkin led the “parade” from recovery to his hospital room. Pumpkin laid beside her boy until he fell asleep and then stretched out on her mutt mat. She took care of her boy. Staff would come to visit William and his service dog. Just hope Pumpkin doesn’t get a “big” head from all the attention.

Our surgeon told us post surgery to expect at least a two-day hospital stay and the possibility of coming home on oxygen overnight. We’re home - a day earlier than anticipated and no oxygen. Another sleep study will be scheduled in four weeks to make sure the sleep apnea is resolved.

A week of miracles, answered prayers, and a 4 Paws angel keeping watch over her boy....

Sunday, April 17, 2011

This afternoon as we walked around our neighborhood, it was so relaxing since William was tethered to Pumpkin. We didn’t have to worry about William taking off.



Yesterday, Pumpkin went with us to Ed’s (my husband) dad’s 95th birthday party.

Pumpkin is so well behaved, looks out for her boy, and puts William at ease in these kinds of crowded social situations, which he used to find overwhelming.

There’s more to the story, and I invite you to go to the blog we created to track our experiences finding 4 Paws for Ability, fundraising, and what follows. Join us at <http://www.4paws4william.blogspot.com/>