

# Rehab dogs help children with cerebral palsy walk

28 February 2019



A USask researcher has found that Labernese (Lab-Bernese mountain dog crosses) visibly improve the ability of the children to walk. Credit: MIRA

A team of researchers, physiotherapists and veterinarians at USask are studying how large rehabilitation dogs can help improve the mobility, balance and well-being of children living with cerebral palsy.

Cerebral palsy is a neurological condition that can affect movement and overall mobility. The study, awarded \$50,000 by the Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation (SHRF), has the potential to reduce health-care costs and improve the lives of many people living with [cerebral palsy](#) in Saskatchewan.

Sarah Donkers, a physiotherapist in USask's School of Rehabilitation Science, has found that [service dogs](#) can be more effective than walkers or canes in improving gait and mobility for some children—and more enjoyable. Donkers provides physical [rehabilitation](#) to young people with cerebral palsy in Saskatchewan and has found the Labernese (Lab-Bernese mountain dog crosses) visibly improve the ability of the children to walk.

"We have seen immediate improvements in children's walking patterns. We think this may be something to do with the animal having a natural walking rhythm, but this is what we are going to study," she said. "We want to know how these improvements occur and will be studying many things such as muscle activation patterns. This is an innovative intervention strategy to improve gait, independence, and overall well-being of children living with cerebral palsy."

The Labernese are not only trained to steady children's gait by walking alongside them with a harness, but can help them open doors, navigate bumps on the sidewalk, and brace if a child become unsteady.

The holistic study by researchers from USask's School of Rehabilitation Science, College of Kinesiology, Department of Sociology and the Western College of Veterinary Medicine, with [community partners](#) including physiotherapists, individuals living with cerebral palsy and Mira, a non-profit organization that trains service dogs, will also research the well-being of the dogs to help improve their care.

"The dogs are designed to replace some of the walking aids and help with balance training, but they also provide other functions and give people more confidence. They can help navigate real-world environments—like going through a door or assisting in case of a fall—and the dogs may make therapy more enjoyable," Donkers said.

"The long-term goal is to increase the use of rehabilitation dogs and mobility service dogs in physical rehabilitation and ultimately improve access to these [dogs](#) for Saskatchewan residents."

Provided by University of Saskatchewan

APA citation: Rehab dogs help children with cerebral palsy walk (2019, February 28) retrieved 17 October 2019 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-02-rehab-dogs-children-cerebral-palsy.html>

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