

## Welcoming Rosie into his life has allowed Fred to achieve some important milestones along the way

**I**HATE it when the doorbell rings around dinner time. It's never welcome.

A young man in a suit was standing there: "Hi, my name's Michael\* and I'm a detective at Maroubra police. I want to speak with you about your son, the one with the dog."

"Come in," said my wife Emily.

The year of COVID has been pretty hard on school kids, especially teenagers — and we have three of them.

School moved to Zoom for many weeks of the year, sports and structured activities were either cancelled or reduced considerably.

It was a lot harder to be social and being social is really important to teenagers.

Being social and learning to be social might even be the point of being a teenager.

Our 14-year-old Fred has autism and attends special school. He's had it toughest of all.

Most of his life — and his social life in particular — is quite structured.

COVID meant that Special Olympics was cancelled. Cooking groups and social groups were cancelled. His weekly running group was cancelled.

Even school by Zoom was impossible, so we explored other ways of home schooling.

Debbie, Fred's speech therapist, had to cancel her in-person sessions. She offered Zoom sessions instead.

"Okay, Deb," I said, "we'll give it a try, but I reckon it won't really work."

To our astonishment, Fred has taken to Zoom therapy like



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a duck to water. The screen acts as a focal point. He concentrates better.

The sessions are better. Much better. And COVID delivered Fred some other remarkable things too.

During the year we took delivery of Rosie, a black Labrador and a trainee autism assistance dog.

Fred has been working with Dogs for Life for a couple of years learning basic dog handling skills and matching his needs with the right dog.

The Dogs for Life program is designed to develop independence.

Fred takes regular walks in the community with Rosie, going on transport and going to the shops.

He also looks after Rosie — he feeds her, plays with her, walks her, takes her to the toilet and they sleep together in his room every night.

Almost all of the "out and about" activities are with a care support worker or a family member but, in time, the plan is to remove as much of the support scaffolding as we can so Fred does more and more things for himself.

Within about two months of Rosie coming to live with us, Fred and Rosie have started taking walks around the block twice a day. Two small 15 minute windows of independence. They are small steps but huge gains.

We have slowly faded the carer-support and replaced it with walkie talkies and mobile phone tracking. Fred loves his walks and has developed road crossing skills that have exceeded all our wildest dreams.

Better still, Fred has parlayed his Zoom teleconferencing skills into FaceTime calls.

He doesn't talk that much — he can use language to get what he wants, but he's not a conversationalist. We've tried to develop some

phone and email skills in the past but progress has been slow. He doesn't seem motivated or interested.

Turns out video calls are a whole other thing. Fred now FaceTimes his relatives and carers, all the time. He now uses his twice daily walks around the block to "make his calls". It's a triumph and a joy to behold.

So back to our policeman visitor. "What has he been doing?" I asked. "Well, look, I'm not here on official police business but I live up the road from you and we have been seeing him walking his dog each day and



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he's been fishing through the recycling bins and smashing bottles on the footpaths all the way down my street."

"Oh" I said, shrivelling just a little bit. And then we gave him all the background and said we would obviously have to re-instate more active supervision until we could correct the problem bottle-smashing behaviour.

Fred responded by standing in the corner and covering his face in the pit of his elbow (more COVID skills) saying "No I'm not cross with you. I'm not cross. I'm not cross. There's not a policeman".

We thanked our friendly policeman neighbour and he was very understanding.

We put some more supports in place for a couple of weeks and there have been no repeat incidents.

As we showed him to the door I asked "How did you know we lived here?"

"He told us this address." Emily and I immediately high-fived — a third big development that Fred has chalked up during COVID.

In 1802, American preacher George Washington Burnap wrote that the "... grand essentials of happiness were: something to do, something to love and something to hope for".

For Fred, his new dog Rosie has had a huge impact on all three of these "conditions for happiness".

The Dogs for Life program is "something to do" — actually its rather a lot of things and very involved.

Rose is certainly something to love.

The most surprising and heartening thing lies in the hope — as Fred acquires the many unexpected and expected new skills, it unlocks more and more things that he and we might hope for.

"And Fred, what happens if you smash bottles in the street?"

"The policeman will come."

**Today is Autism Awareness Day.** Richard Amos is a corporate lawyer and a director of The Junction Works, a leading disability services provider in South Western Sydney.